


City Limits

Images of Boston in Transition



Photographs by
Roswell Angier,
Polly Brown, Bill Burke,
Kelly Wise

Foreword to the 1987 edition
by Robert Coles

New foreword by B. D. Colen

City Limits



Kelly Wise Beacon Hill *Boston skyline from a rooftop on Cedar Street*

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Edited by Kelly Wise

Foreword by Robert Coles

Northeastern University Press Boston

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Kelly Wise

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Foreword to the Humanities Open Book Edition

When *City Limits: Images of Boston in Transition* was first published in 1987, it doubtless introduced many of its readers to communities in their city about which they knew next to nothing. For almost since its founding, Boston has been more a collection of insulated, isolated city states, sharing a government and little else, rather than a unified whole. Every school child used to know that the Lowells spoke only to the Cabots, and the Cabots spoke only to God, but there was little discussion of the fact that the Irish of Southie knew next to nothing of the African Americans of Dorchester, and the Italians of the North End neither knew about, nor cared to know about, those living in the rest of the city's many ethnic enclaves. In the pages of this book, however, four legends of Boston photography—Bill Burke, Roswell Angier, Polly Brown, and Kelly Wise—used their singular visions and photographic skills to bring Bostonians images that captured the varied lives lived in many of the city's neighborhoods.

“Unique” is a term that is uniquely overused, suggesting as it does that the thing being described truly is one of a kind. But *City Limits*, in its photographic examination of a socio-economic and racial cross-section of Bostonians in the 1980s, may just be unique among books of photography. Because what other such collections of urban photography can we think of that seem as painfully relevant today as they did

almost 40 years ago, at the moment the contributing photographers froze split seconds in time?

I come to this fascinating collection of photos after having spent 23 years living—and photographing—in metro Boston. And these photos remind me of two specific things that occurred shortly after I arrived in the city in 1993. The first was co-workers telling me that I couldn't possibly hope to understand the reality of the city without reading *Common Ground*, Anthony J. Lukas's Pulitzer Prize-winning exposition of the city's busing crisis of the 1970s and the racial realities that made that crisis inevitable. The second thing was an evening after work spent on the MBTA's Green Line, trying to get a bit of a feel for Boston. I rode the line to its Lechmere terminus, and on my trip back into downtown, the train stopped at the “Gahden” just after the end of a hockey game. The doors opened, and “Bru’ns” fans poured into the car. Leading the charge was a gaggle of young, white women, sporting towering beehive hairdos and leather jackets more common 30 years earlier. One of them openly hurled a racial epithet at her friend and dissolved in a braying laugh. Where, I wondered, after that jarring evening on the Green Line, was I living? Where was the Boston celebrated in so many novels and history books?

During my time in Boston it became painfully obvious that the photographers whose work constitutes *City Limits* not only captured the city as it existed in that moment of time in the early 1980s, they also captured the city as it would exist out of that past and into the present; the residents of neighborhoods changed, but the ugly truths of the isolation of those neighborhoods remained essentially the same. That truth was driven home to me shortly before I left the city in 2016, and was going through the images that make up a decade-long photo project in which I documented MBTA riders on the Green and Red Lines, from Brookline to Park Street on the Green Line, from Park Street on the Red Line to Harvard Square in the morning, and back in the opposite direction in the evening. With few exceptions, those photos show the Green Line ridership to be white and Asian, and generally well-to-do, while the Red Line carries a far more diverse group of riders, out of and back to neighborhoods in which most residents look and speak like the riders who leave and return to them.

None of this is to suggest that Boston is the only city like that reflected in these pages. But it is one of the few cities whose mythology suggests that it is somehow “special,” somehow better than the cities we know have populations divided by race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and, of course, class.

In some ways this digital reissuing of *City Limits* is even more important than its original publication. For its existence as a stop on the internet will make its outstanding photography—and the lessons those photographs impart—available to a far wider audience than the original book was. Hopefully, those seeing these photographs will realize that while they capture a time long past, they also reflect an ugly present—made even uglier by the fact that Boston is every day more a city of shockingly rich, and crushingly poor. And perhaps as viewers think about why that is true, at least some will be inspired try to effect real change.

B. D. COLEN

Acknowledgments

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Eelco Wolf, director of Worldwide Marketing Communications at Polaroid, and the Polaroid Corporation for generously funding the fieldwork of this project and the traveling exhibition, *City Limits*, and also for providing Polaroid equipment and materials. Throughout this project Eelco Wolf has offered helpful counsel and unqualified support.

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Foreword

In 1973 my son (then nine) and I were spending time in several of Alaska's Eskimo communities near the Kobuk River. We were talking with Eskimo families, trying to learn how certain Eskimo children grew up and assumed their particular lives. We were listening to men and women speak of the Arctic tundra, of the cloudy sky that covers it for so many months of each year. We were looking at the drawings and paintings of Eskimo children, noting their decided interest in connecting the world around them (the land, the vegetation, the animal and fish life, the weather) to their personal world. We were learning; we were seeing with our eyes how a particular group of people living in a particular stretch of America conducted themselves in the course of their everyday lives.

As a child psychiatrist I was especially interested in what I heard—the various remarks, declarations, questions, statements of fact or fantasy spoken to a pair of visitors from (as it is so often put in Alaska) "the lower forty-eight." However, I was at the time breaking in a new kind of tape recorder and having an exceedingly rough time doing so. Meanwhile, my son was having a fine, free time of it with his camera—clicking away tactfully yet persistently, loading, emptying, loading yet again and, occasionally, helping out his mechanically dim-witted dad. All the while an Eskimo youth of twelve who had become a friend of my son's had been doing his own kind of observations, making his own appraisal of these two characters from afar. At one point the Eskimo lad decided to become somewhat more active in his approach to us and to abandon his posture of the one willing to provide quietly intelligent, good-natured hospitality in favor of a more pointedly instructive manner. His words of advice, or at least some of them, went like this: "Why not put that machine away? Don't worry about what we say! Lots of time

we don't talk. We're talking now because you want us to talk! Your son is *seeing* us; that's what to do. The more you see here, the better you'll know us. We have some snapshots I could show you. If you want, you can make your own snapshots of us. You can take them back home and show us to people. You can take pictures of everyone here, our village [Noorvik], and tell everyone who looks at them that they've visited us, through seeing the pictures. They can see our houses, and our river, and our salmon drying, and our store, and our landing field, and our boats, and most of all, they can see us kids—what we do: going in our school and coming out of it, and playing and hunting and fishing. Then they'll know us, and we won't be strangers—them to us."

I thought of that child and our Alaskan conversations of years ago as I looked through these photographs of Boston's people and Boston's neighborhoods. I thought, too, of my own work in Boston, done during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the city was fast changing, becoming no longer only a place where the Irish and the Italians and the Jews lived in a sometimes uneasy peace (along with smaller concentrations of Polish and Greek people, and people from Lithuania, and of course those who lived in Chinatown, and those Protestants from the British Isles who called the Back Bay and Beacon Hill and parts of the Fenway their home). I thought, too, of the research I had done, of the bus rides I had taken to school—with black children from Roxbury going to Beacon Hill well before a federal judge issued his ambitious orders, which have become so significant a part of the city's social history. I was, then, trying to see what those children saw. As with the Eskimo boy, I soon enough heard exactly what those black children saw—a lot. "You go through lots of different places," one ten-year-old girl told me; then she ex-

plained: "There's us, here in Roxbury, then there are the whites who aren't much better off than we are; and then you can see the downtown area, and you can see some people who are really on top, and they look it and they walk it, and if you could hear them talk, I'll bet they'd talk it! My momma told us Boston is lots of cities in one city, just like it was down South where she lived [Atlanta]. You can get yourself an education just by riding the bus, if you keep your eyes open and you sit near the window on the bus, and you really pay attention. You just keep looking, and you keep taking it in."

The "it" was, of course, the diversity of a given metropolis, increasingly witnessed and comprehended by a youngster who may have been having her troubles with a formal course of study, but who was not unable to take stock of what was happening to her native city. And yet, prompted by that ongoing visual experience, she was able to put into words a running commentary about a changing urban scene. Put differently, for this girl, as with the Eskimo boy, the world was something to be absorbed through the eyes, and then fathomed by a mind that gets wonderfully stimulated and provoked through its exposure to the apparent, the evident—to what is in full view. In contrast, alas, is all too often quite another approach—certain thoroughly wordy and abstract presentations that get called, in their sum, "textbooks," which have a collective "subject matter": urban sociology, a branch of the social sciences. Lord, we need our language, as it gets applied to this life; and we need our scholars who examine long and hard and closely one or another aspect of humankind. In so doing, they emerge with generalizations and formulations, with theories that (one hopes) become not a testimony to our capacity for idolatry, so much

as expressions of our searching and our capacity to explore, conclude, and, not least, have second thoughts. Still, reading and writing are not the only ways to come to terms with life. Nor is resort to verbal speculations, never mind definitive assertions called conclusions, the only way for one to begin to get some much-needed sense of mastery over the people, places, things of this earthly universe of ours.

In *City Limits* the cameras of certain photographers have been allowed rein, and the result is comparable to what the two children quoted above found available to them—pictures seen through the camera each of us has as our inheritance. A world is witnessed, the sight of a city is captured, engraved engagingly, if not unforgettably: the nuances and the subtleties, the ironies and the ambiguities, the ups and downs of living, the good-natured moments, and, sadly, the times of bad temper, of doubt and scorn and suspicion and hate. Much has happened to Boston in the past half-century, and *City Limits* casts a sustained and honest glimpse at the consequences of all those events: people of various "sorts and conditions," in the phrase of the Book of Common Prayer, trying as best they can to make do. In a sense, then, the reader about to turn the pages of this book is someone embarking on a wide-ranging contemporary journey: America's oldest city in its newest presence. This is a book in the best tradition of documentary photography, not to mention urban studies: an original, ambitious, and probing expedition into homes and schools and churches and playgrounds and stores, into streets that families reluctantly or casually or proudly call their own, into neighborhoods of several kinds, into Boston as it grows close, indeed, to the onset of the third millennium.

ROBERT COLES

Introduction

Here you will not find the art galleries of Newbury Street, the boutiques of Copley Place, tourists at Fa-neuil Hall Market, the swan boats of the Public Garden, or an August game at Fenway Park.

We chose not to walk the Freedom Trail.

For nearly eighteen months we tramped through the neighborhoods of Boston, studying their textures and terrain. Our attention was centered on the people who make their homes in the city, play in Healy Park in Roslindale, hang out together after work and before dinner in the Hispanic section of Hyde Square in Jamaica Plain, water plants on the porches of three-deckers in Dorchester, take the rattling Orange Line out to Dudley Station, gather together for rooftop parties on Beacon Hill, serve pasta primavera and luscious cannoli in the North End, shop in Chinatown for foot-long green beans and fresh sea crab, and jog over the crosswalks to the Esplanade and the river.

Boston today is a city of more than 600,000 people. Forty-four percent of its inhabitants are black, Hispanic, or Asian-Pacific islanders. It is a city in which one in every ten residents lives in public housing and whose demographics have changed radically over the past three decades with the exodus of the white middle class, begun in 1950, and the changes wrought by gentrification. In some of its neighborhoods, which are predominantly either black or white, boundaries are struck and racial feelings sometimes bristle. But in others with greater ethnic mix, there is less entrenchment and more opportunity for the normal give and take of people living together in an urban environment.

The city has long been a haven for foreigners. In the early 1880s immigrants began to arrive from Nova Scotia and then from Ireland. They were fol-

lowed by others from Italy, southern and eastern Europe, and more recently from Vietnam, Cambodia, India, Russia, Czechoslovakia, Puerto Rico, Lebanon, Cape Verde, Laos, Cuba, and Haiti. Today Boston is a multiracial city with strong ethnic communities.

It is a city with an enlightened spirit and an embattled past. The roots of protest go back to pre-revolutionary days and to the Stamp Act, the Tea Party, and the pursuit and harassment of fugitive slaves. Some of its inhabitants have ancestors who crossed the Atlantic in the *Mayflower*; others were members of the Watch and Ward Society that banned Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Some of the people we photographed remember with bitterness the court-ordered desegregation of schools in 1974 and student busing. "It was the worst thing that happened to this city," a woman in Charlestown said. "People used to sit on rooftops with their rifles and wait for the buses." Others marched recently in Chinatown in a fervent protest of police brutality to an Asian refugee.

We were interested in the past only insomuch as it was reflected in the present. Our work was absorbing; Boston proved to be a hearty, livable city, its people both individual and quite vocal. Whatever one's good will and honest intentions, to photograph is to confront. There were numerous occurrences of welcome and generosity, and memorable extensions of trust. As expected, there were also a few confrontations.

What did we encounter that was unexpected? The visible absence of the middle class—a striking urban phenomenon in America, dramatized in Boston, of rich and poor. We also found neighborhoods that are no longer as communal as once they were when

there were Little Mayors and everybody on a block
was known by his first name, and when streets could
be cordoned off willy-nilly for an important street
hockey game.

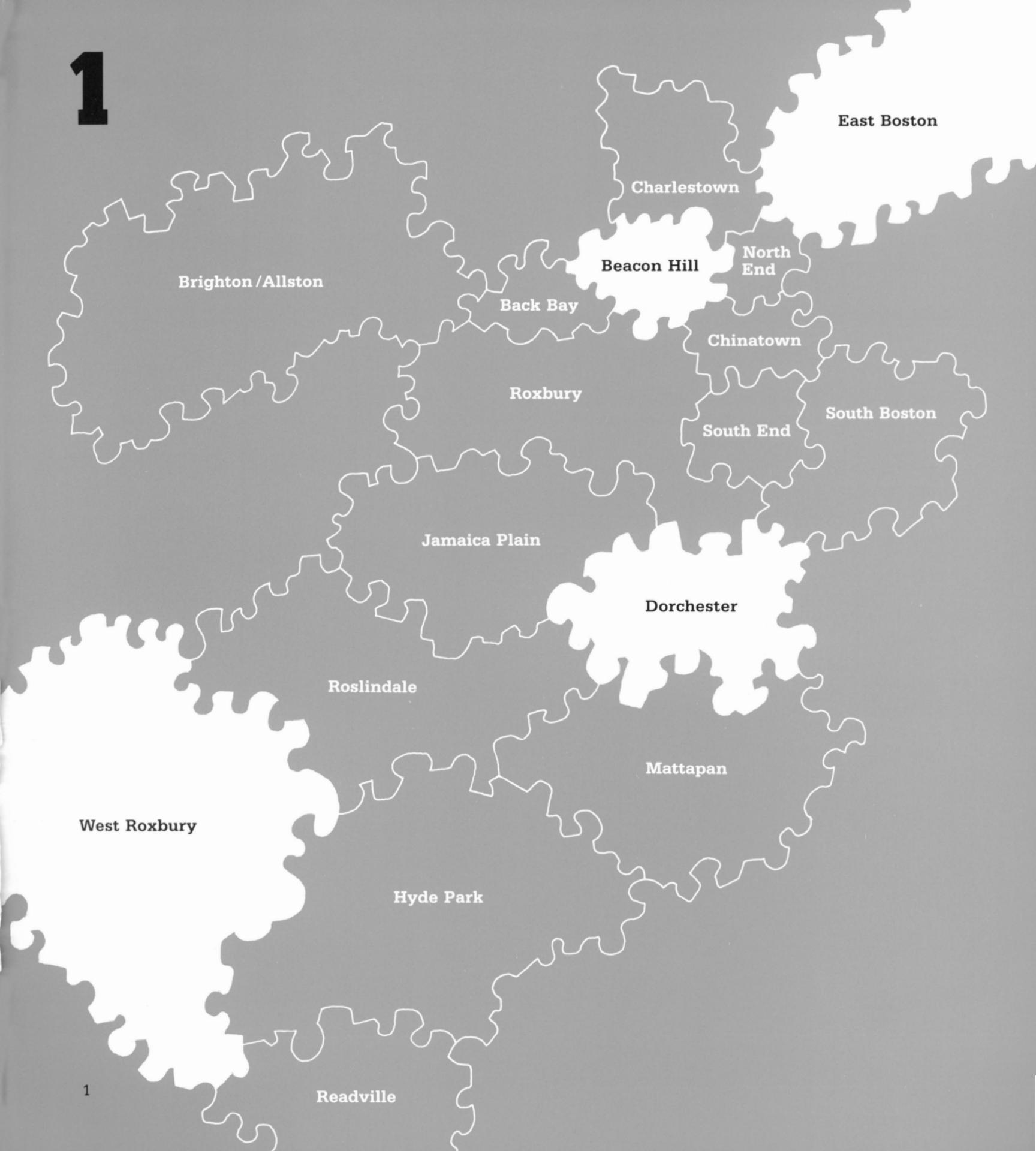
Although Boston is no longer a city of homogeneous neighborhoods, the people we met and photographed still demonstrate a strong loyalty to various areas in which they live. It is evident that many of them drink at certain neighborhood bars, participate in community festivals, attend the nearby church, and buy most of their groceries around the corner.

Communal feelings in a number of these neighborhoods are engendered in part by shared activities, ethnic rituals, and annual events. They also spring from the camaraderie of older men in Roslindale who have built their own bocce ball court in a city woods, the fleet of women with strollers in Brighton, the Fourth of July parties in Mattapan and on Beacon Hill rooftops, and the cohesive presence all over the city of churches like Roxbury's First Methodist Church and St. Catherine's in Charlestown.

This book is a mosaic of four photographers' visual response to Boston. Centered in the neighborhoods, it depicts urban reality as we saw it—moments of isolation and despair, family communion, public celebration, and private affirmation.

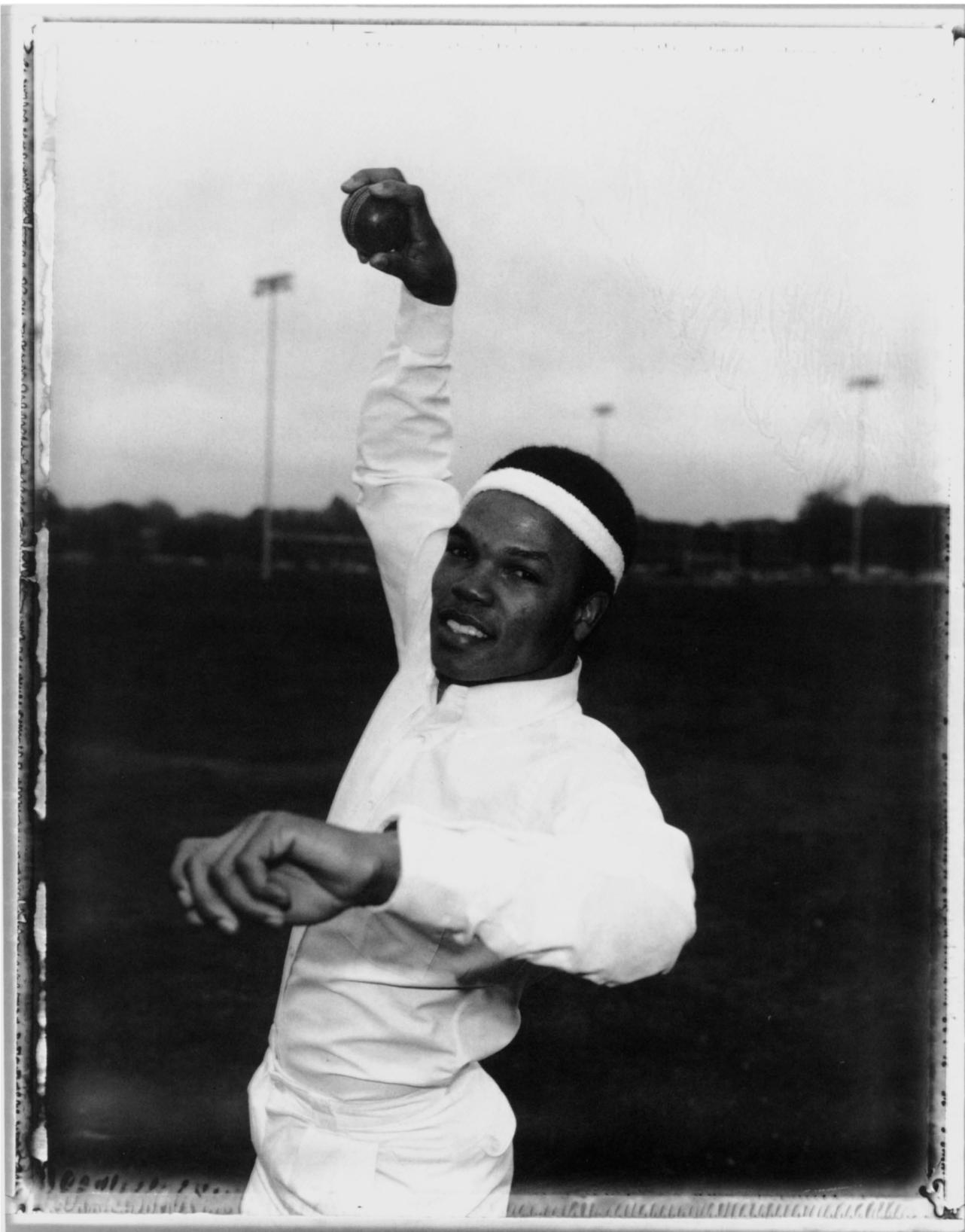
KELLY WISE

1





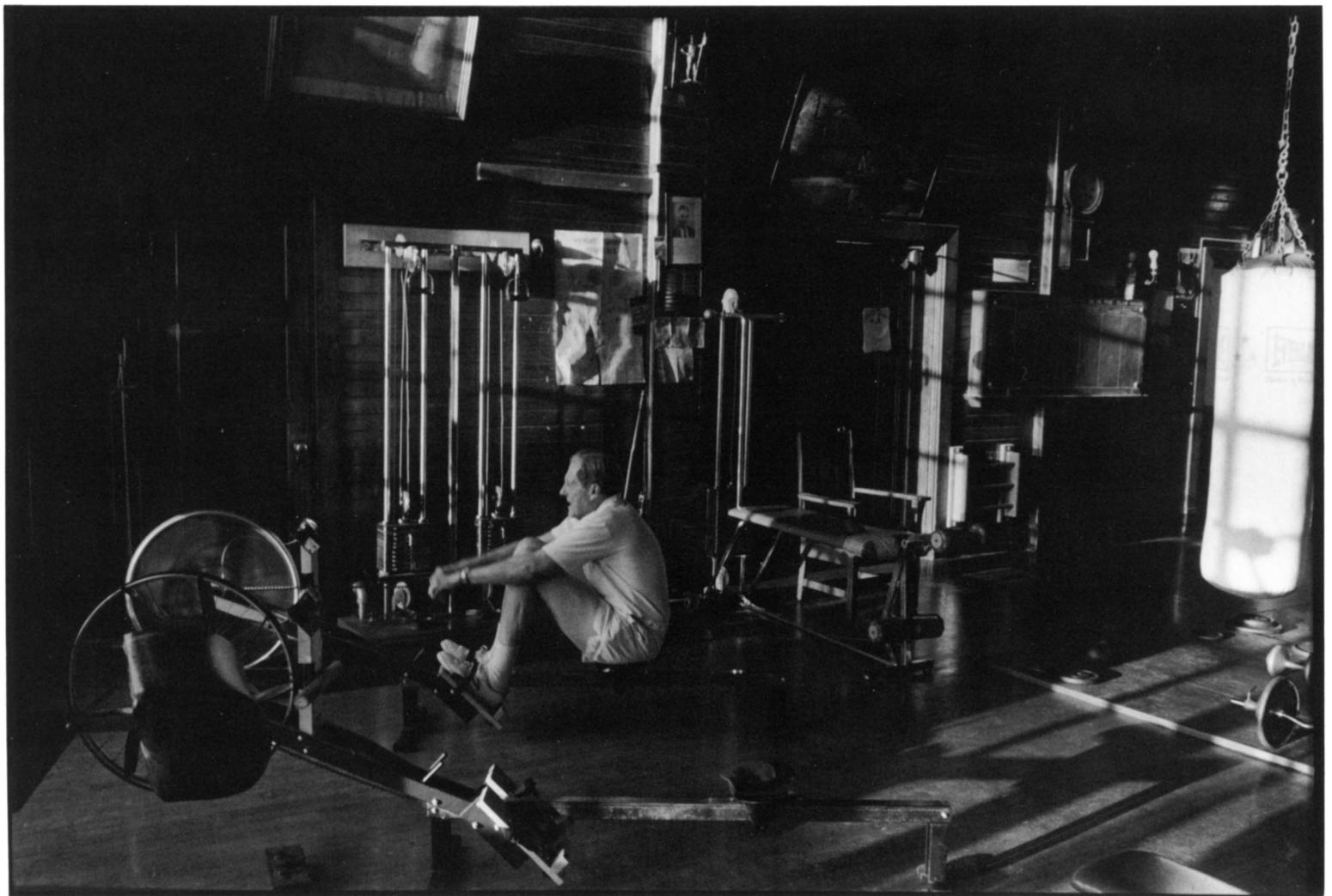
Roswell Angier East Boston *View of Boston from Madonna Queen Shrine, Orient Heights*



Bill Burke Dorchester Cricket player, Franklin Field



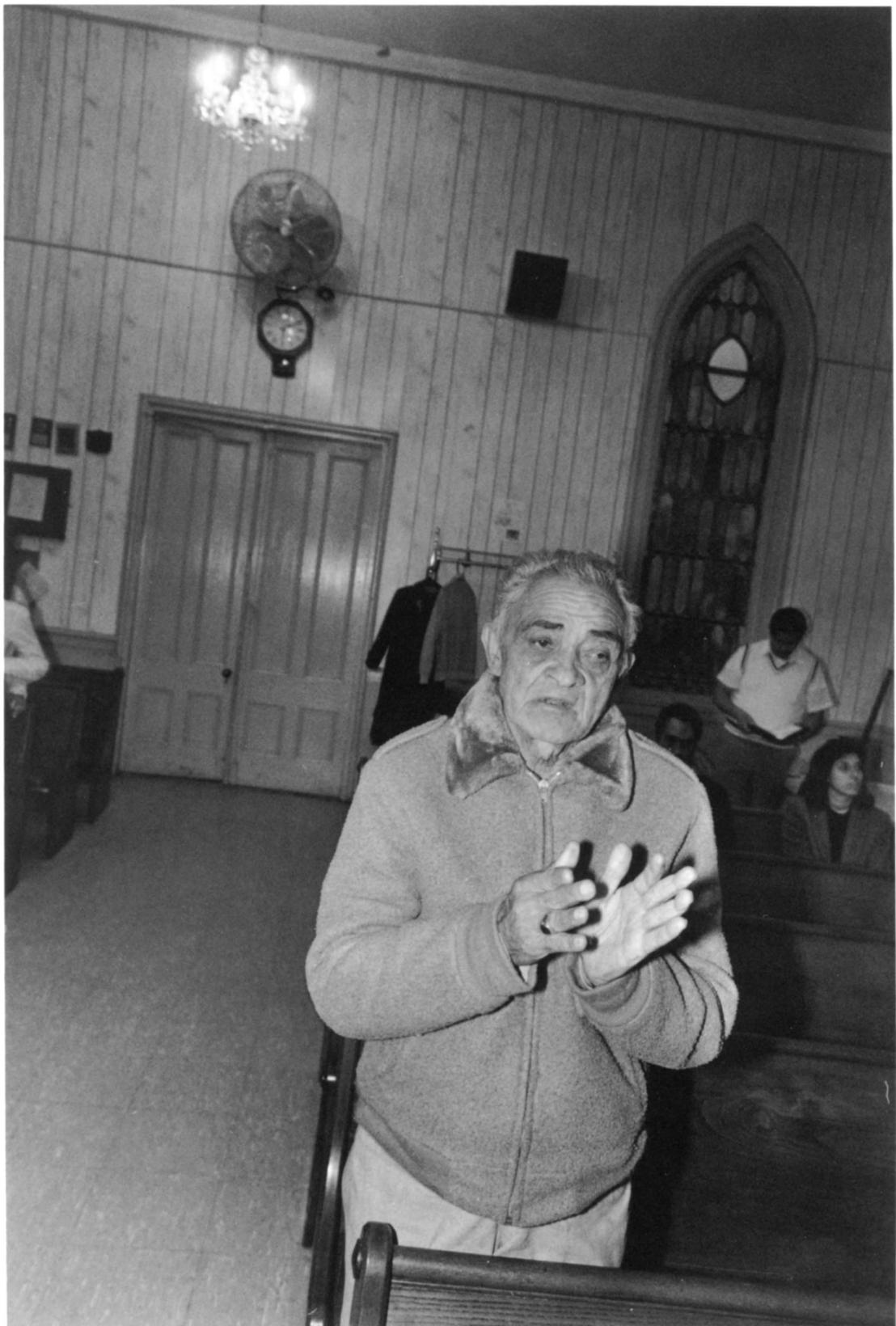
Bill Burke Dorchester Fields Corner bus station



Bill Burke Beacon Hill Union Boat Club gymnasium



Polly Brown Beacon Hill *Boston Athenaeum*



Roswell Angier Dorchester *Asamblea Cristiana Pentecostal*



Roswell Angier East Boston *Italian-American War Veterans' Post*



Bill Burke Dorchester Family



Bill Burke Dorchester *Dorchester Yacht Club*



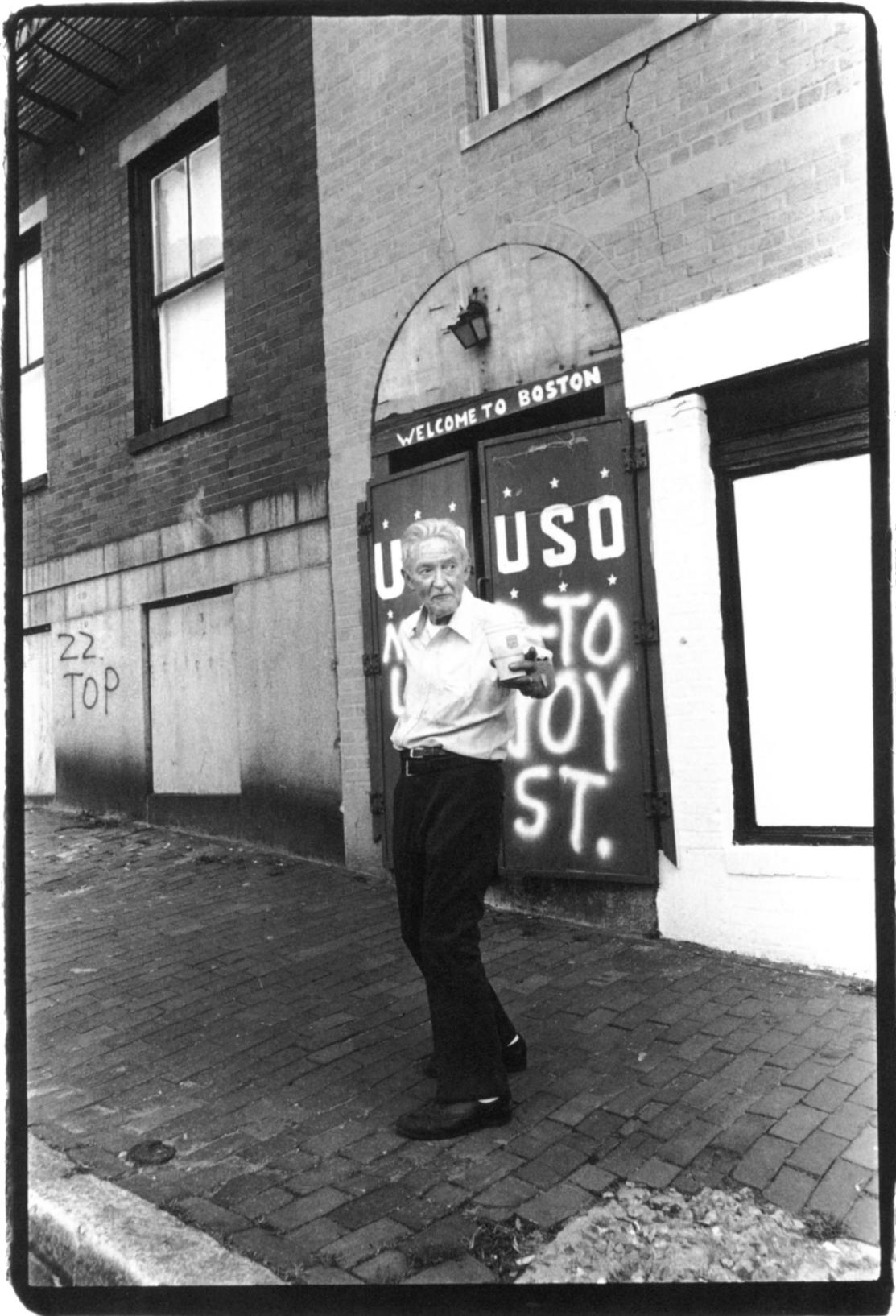
Bill Burke Dorchester *New chicken wagon, Codman Square*



Bill Burke West Roxbury *Mario's Bakery*



Polly Brown West Roxbury *Irish Social Club party*



Kelly Wise Beacon Hill Joy Street



Polly Brown Dorchester English High School senior prom, Bayside Exposition Center



Bill Burke Dorchester Guyanese wedding party



Kelly Wise Beacon Hill *Charles Street*



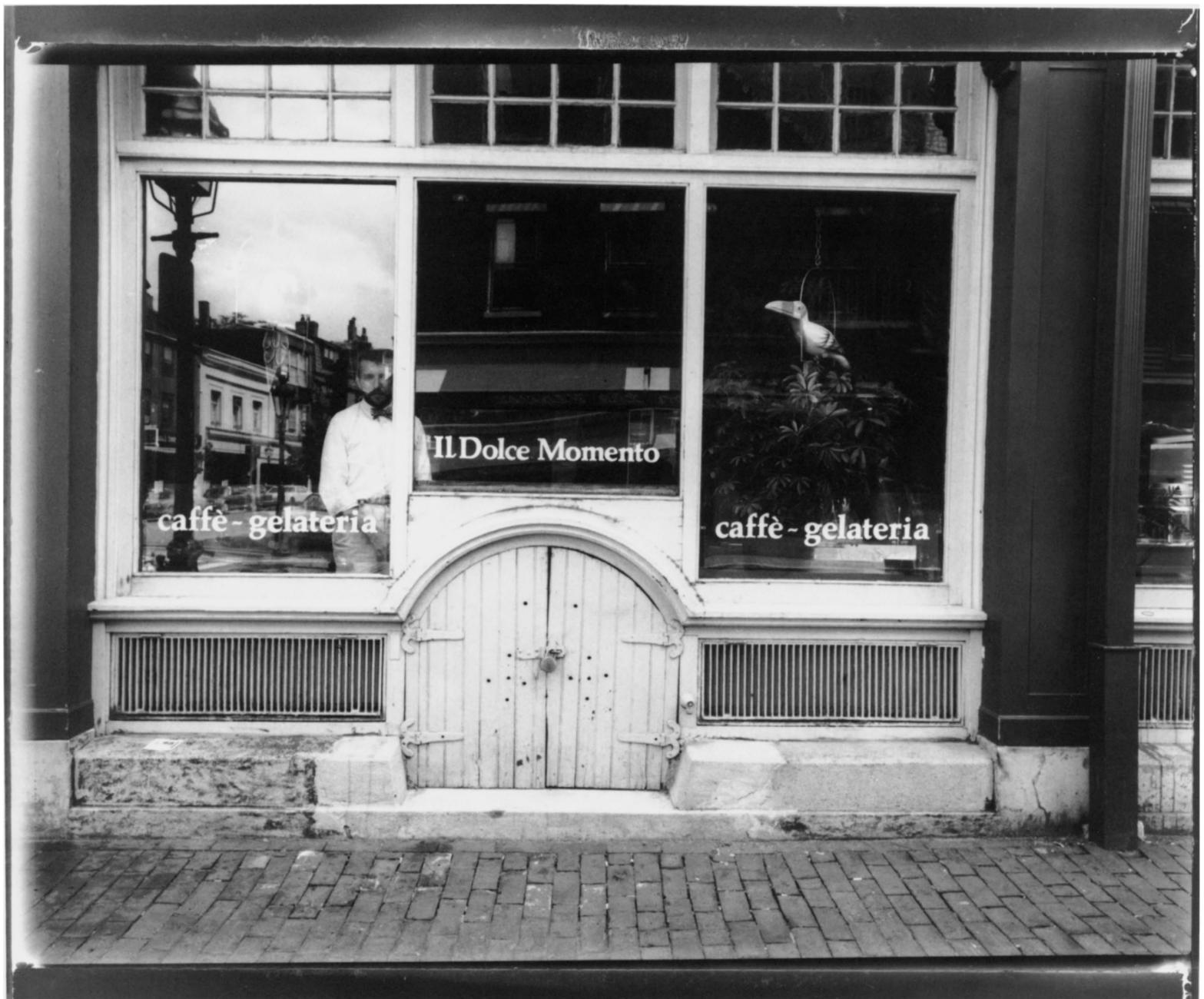
Roswell Angier East Boston *Taxi drivers, Maverick Square*



Roswell Angier East Boston *Car wash*



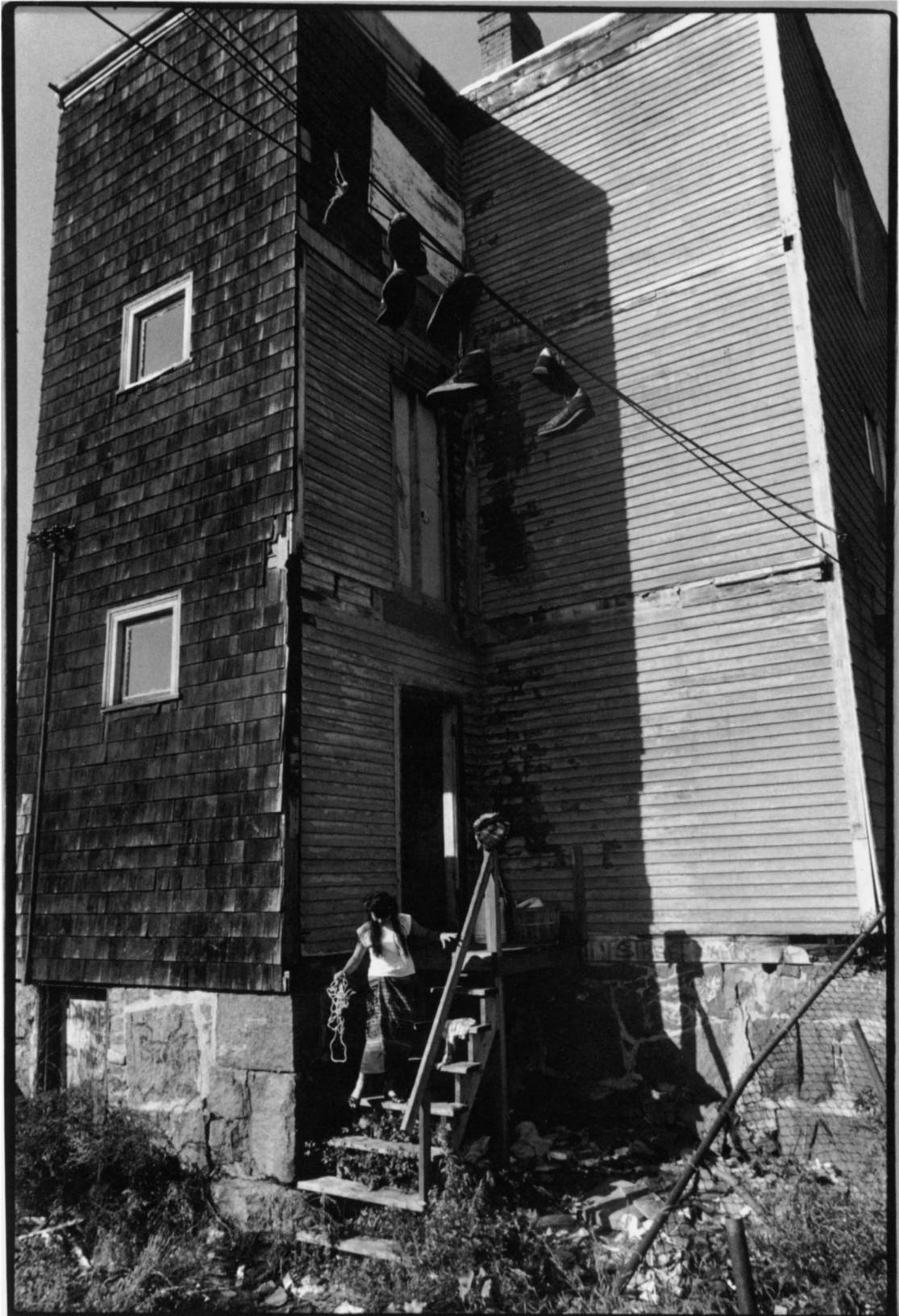
Roswell Angier West Roxbury *Spectators at softball game*



Kelly Wise Beacon Hill *Caffè, Charles Street*



Kelly Wise Beacon Hill *Rooftop party*



Bill Burke Dorchester *Laotian woman*



Bill Burke Dorchester Cambodians watching Prince Norodom Saramarit on videotape



Roswell Angier East Boston *Housing project*



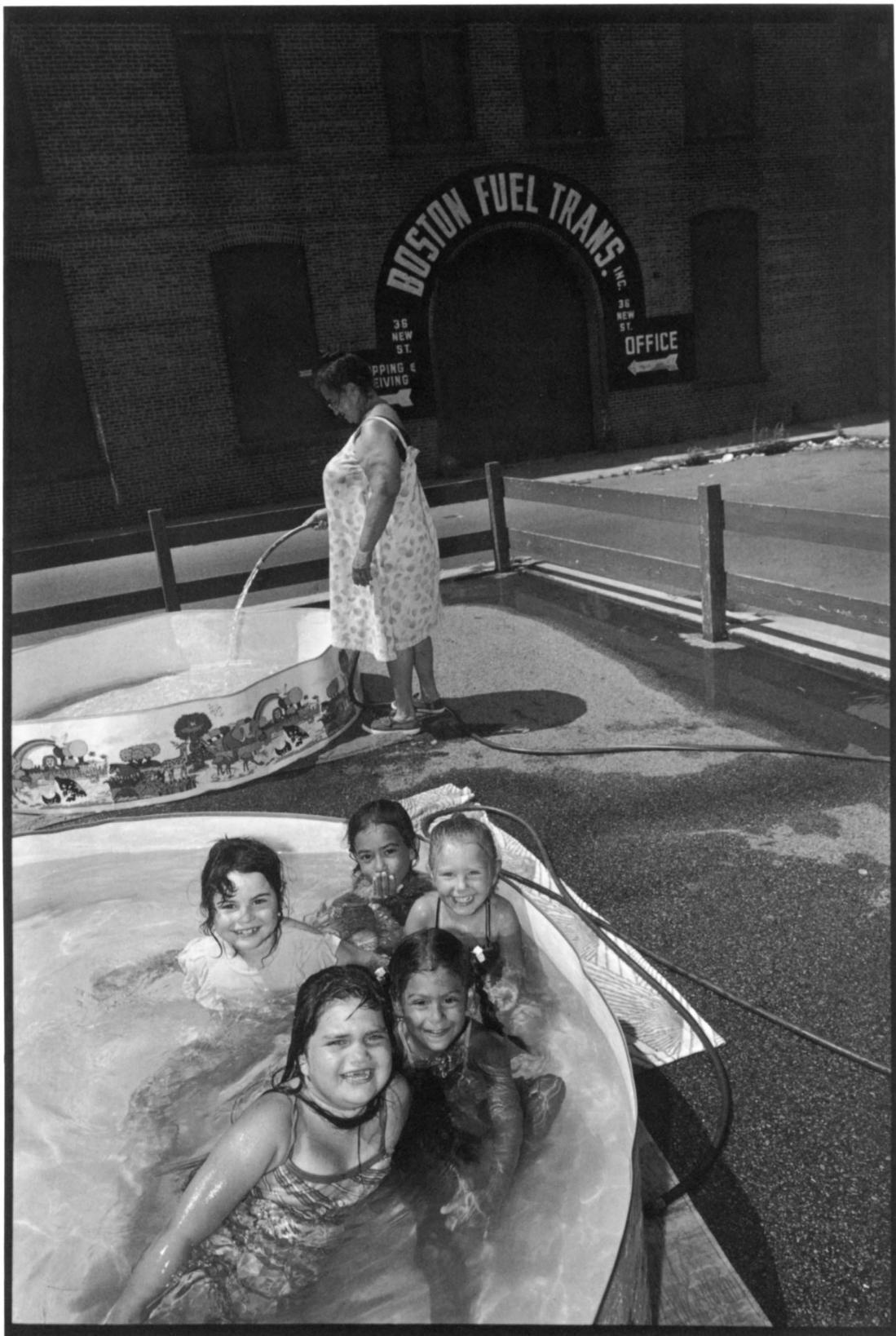
Roswell Angier Beacon Hill Demonstration, State House



Bill Burke Dorchester *Church of God of Prophecy*



Kelly Wise Beacon Hill *Moving day*



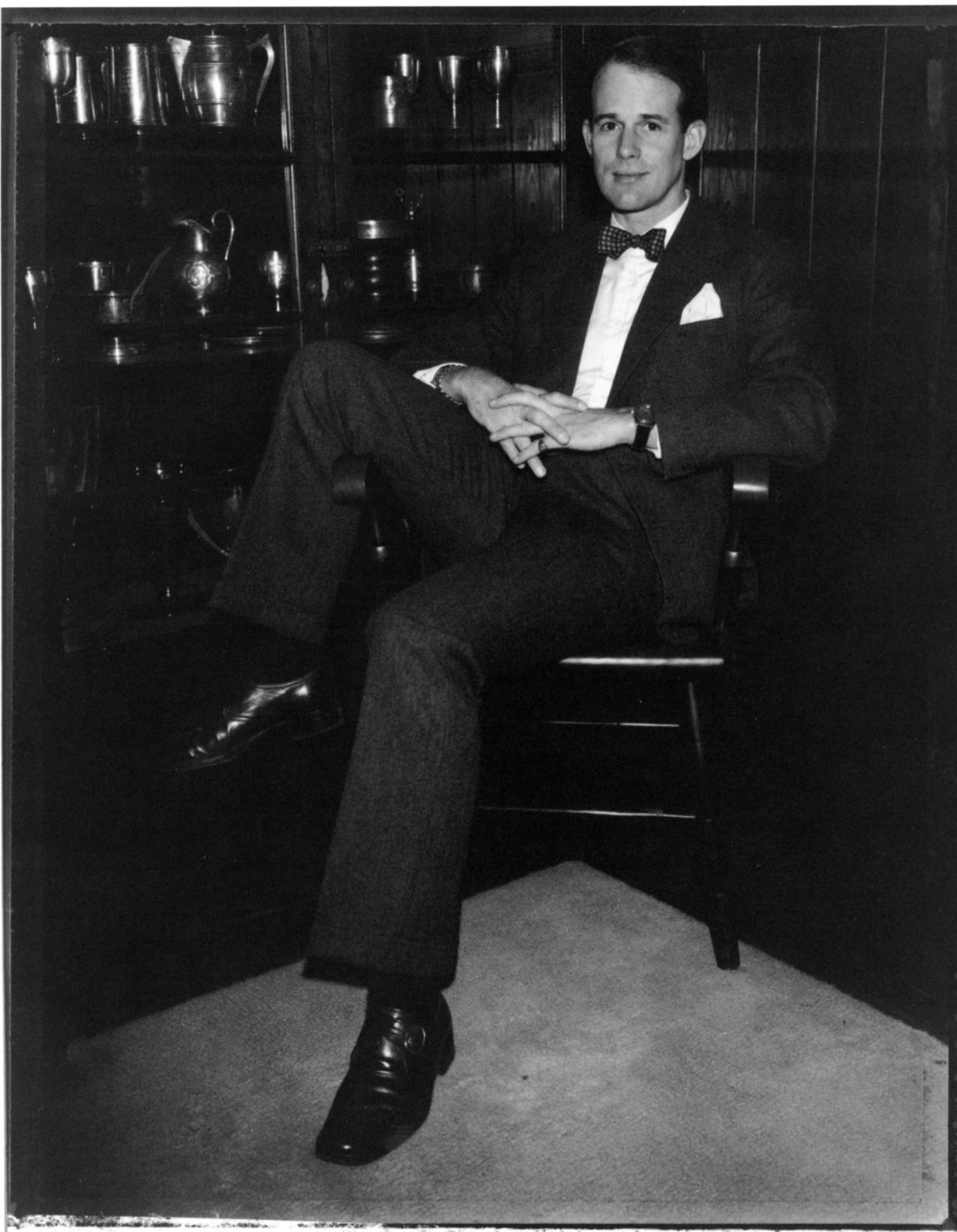
Roswell Angier East Boston *Corner of Maverick and New Streets*



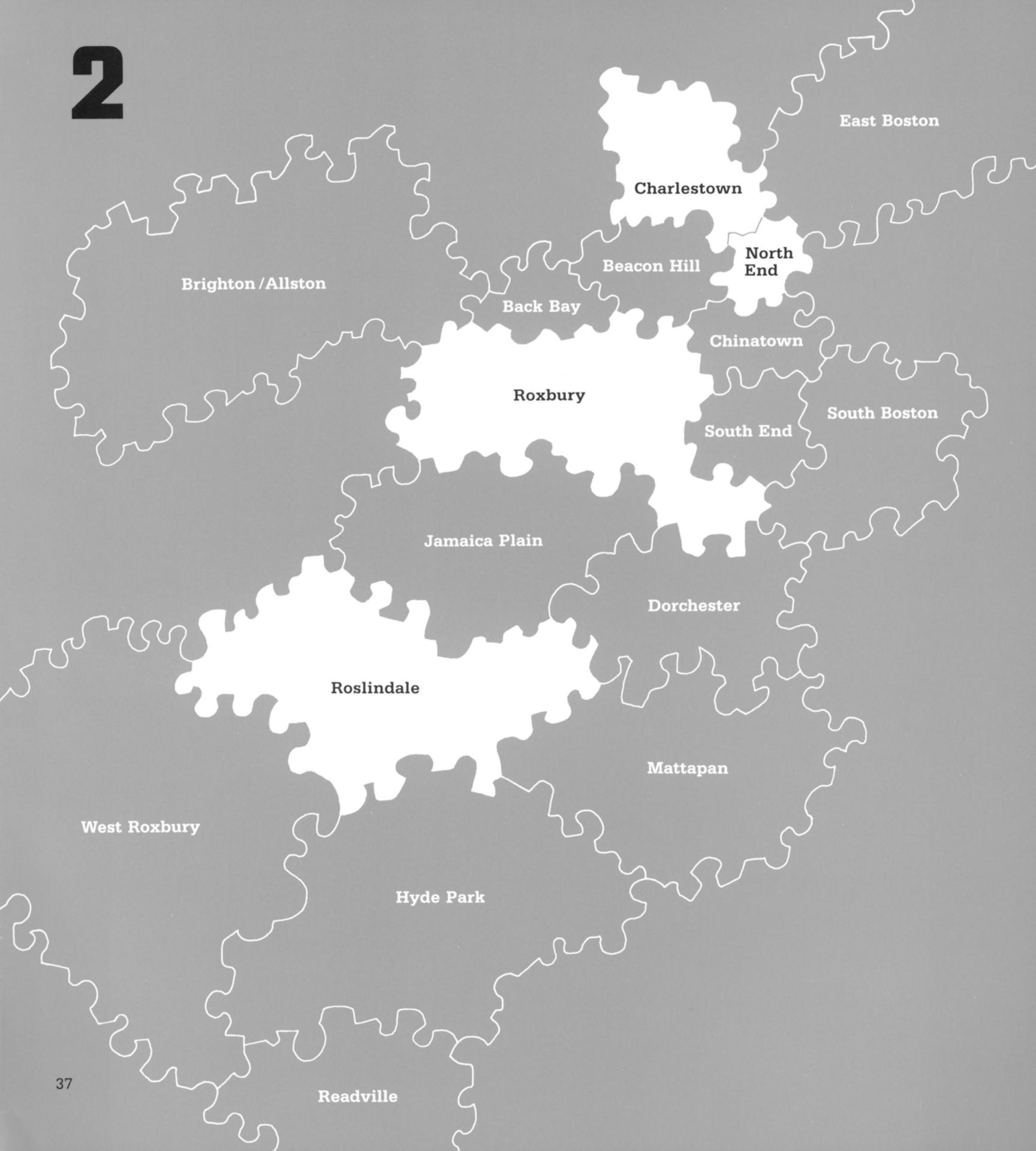
Polly Brown West Roxbury St. Patrick's Day party, Stonehedge Nursing Home



Roswell Angier East Boston *Rojas family*

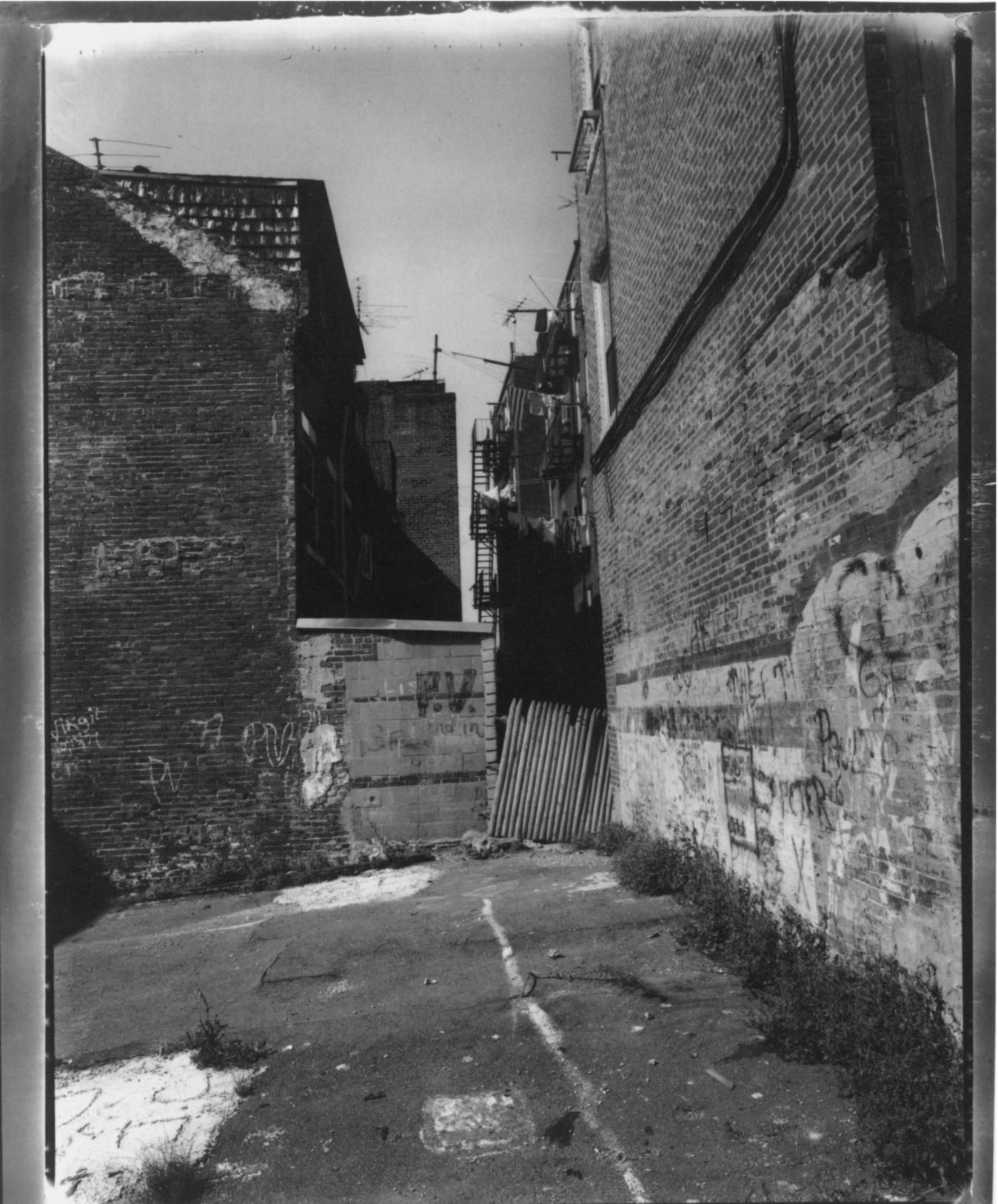


Bill Burke Beacon Hill *Clive Russ, Union Boat Club*





Roswell Angier Roxbury Washington Street



Kelly Wise North End *Copp's Hill*



Kelly Wise Charlestown Reception after chamber music recital



Roswell Angier Charlestown *Bunker Hill Day*



Kelly Wise Charlestown *Condominium conversion*



Kelly Wise Roslindale *Fence painter*



Polly Brown Charlestown *Kay Whelan and granddaughter*



Roswell Angier Roslindale *Carnival*



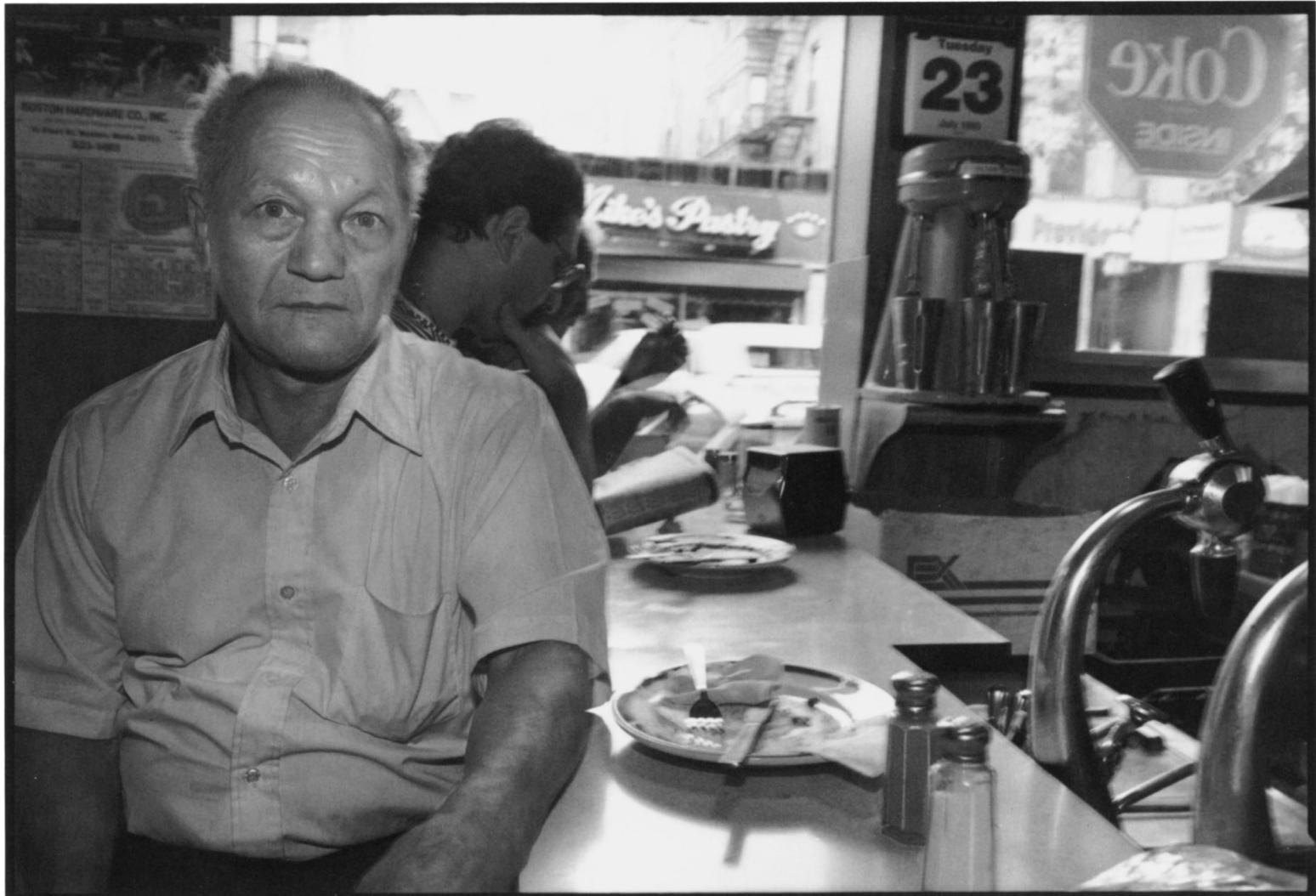
Kelly Wise Charlestown *Phipps Burial Ground*



Bill Burke Roslindale *Hot rod*



Roswell Angier North End Hanover Street



Roswell Angier North End *Del Bene's Lunch*



Roswell Angier North End *Richmond Street*



Kelly Wise Charlestown *Ceremony of the Cross, Good Friday*



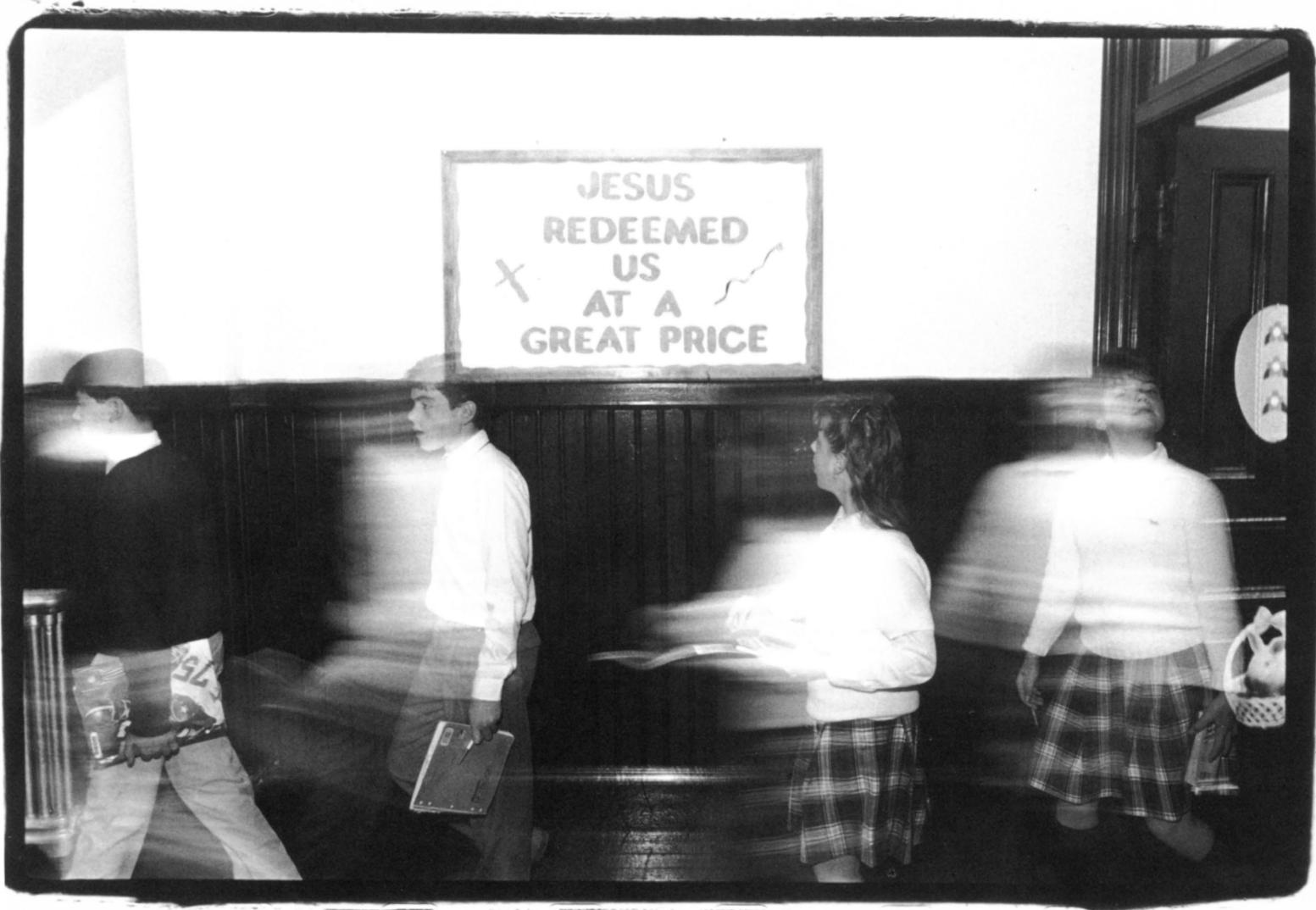
Kelly Wise Charlestown Reverend Isaiah Sears, First Baptist Church



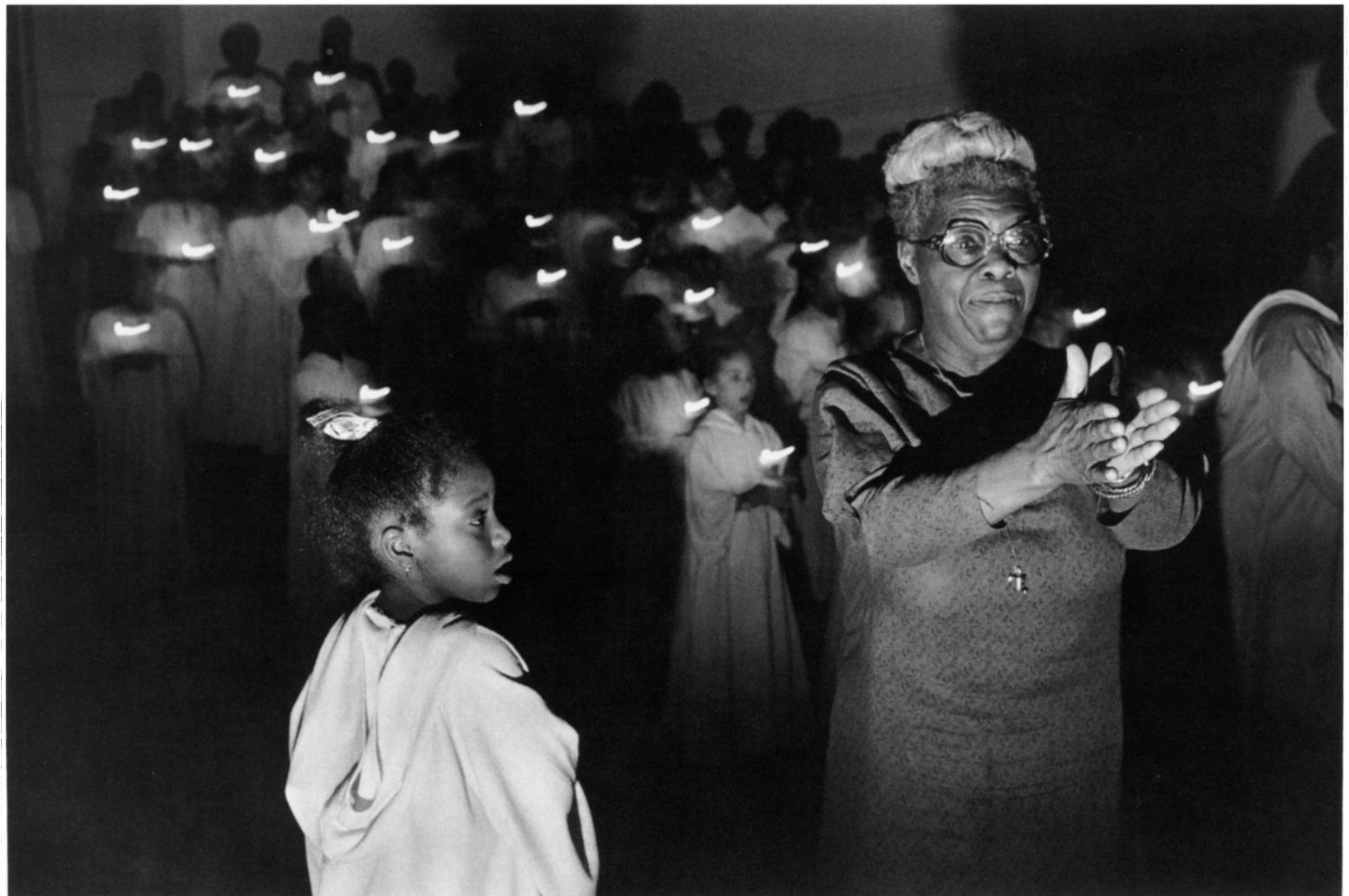
Polly Brown Roxbury *Caribbean carnival*



Kelly Wise Charlestown *Cleanup, community garden*



Kelly Wise Charlestown St. Francis de Sales School



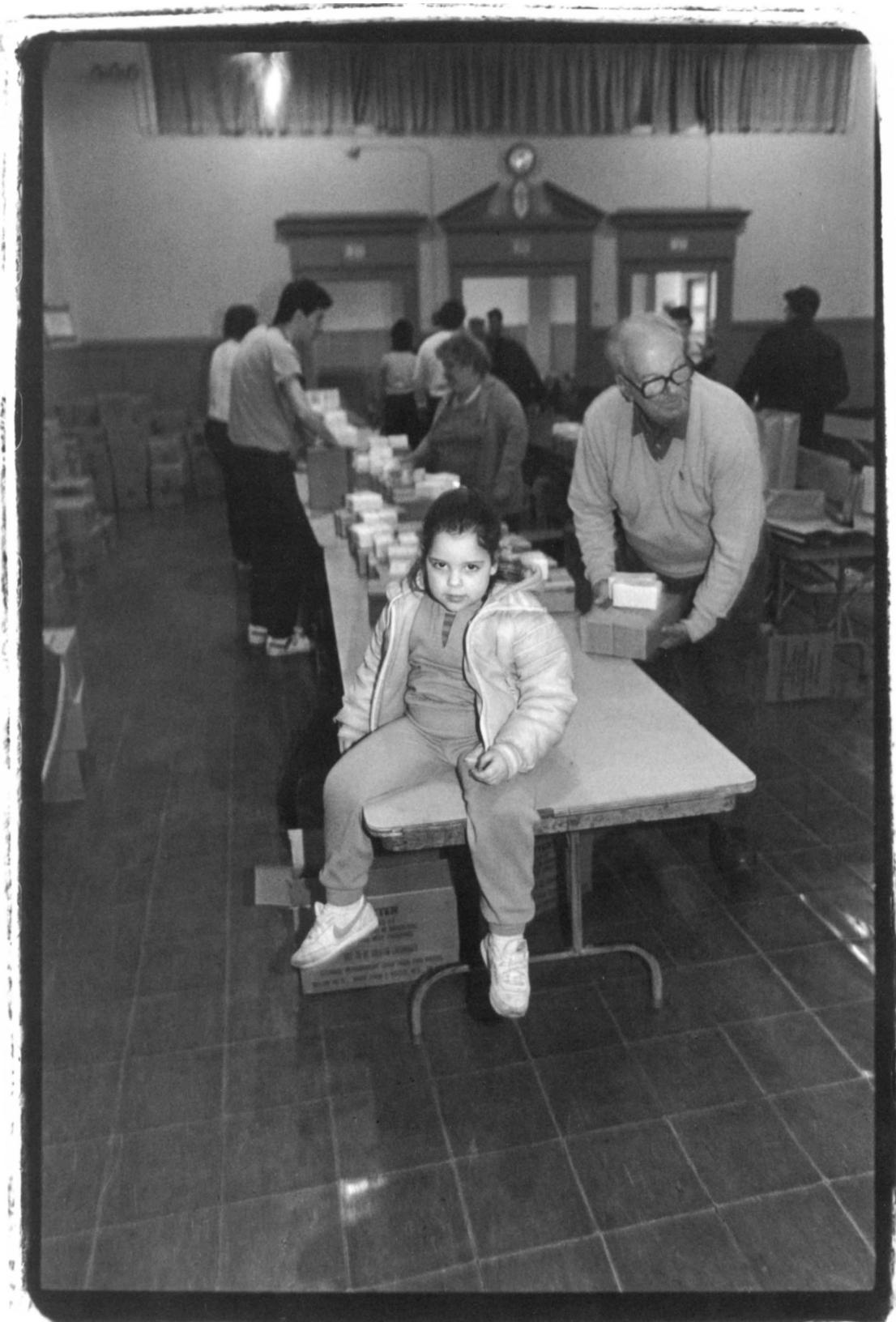
Polly Brown Roxbury *Black Nativity* rehearsal, Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts



Roswell Angier North End *Feast of St. Jude*



Polly Brown Roxbury Barber shop



Kelly Wise Charlestown *Food distribution day, St. Catherine's School*



Roswell Angier North End *Bakery*



Polly Brown Roxbury Hillside Street, Mission Hill



Bill Burke Roxbury *Prentiss Street*



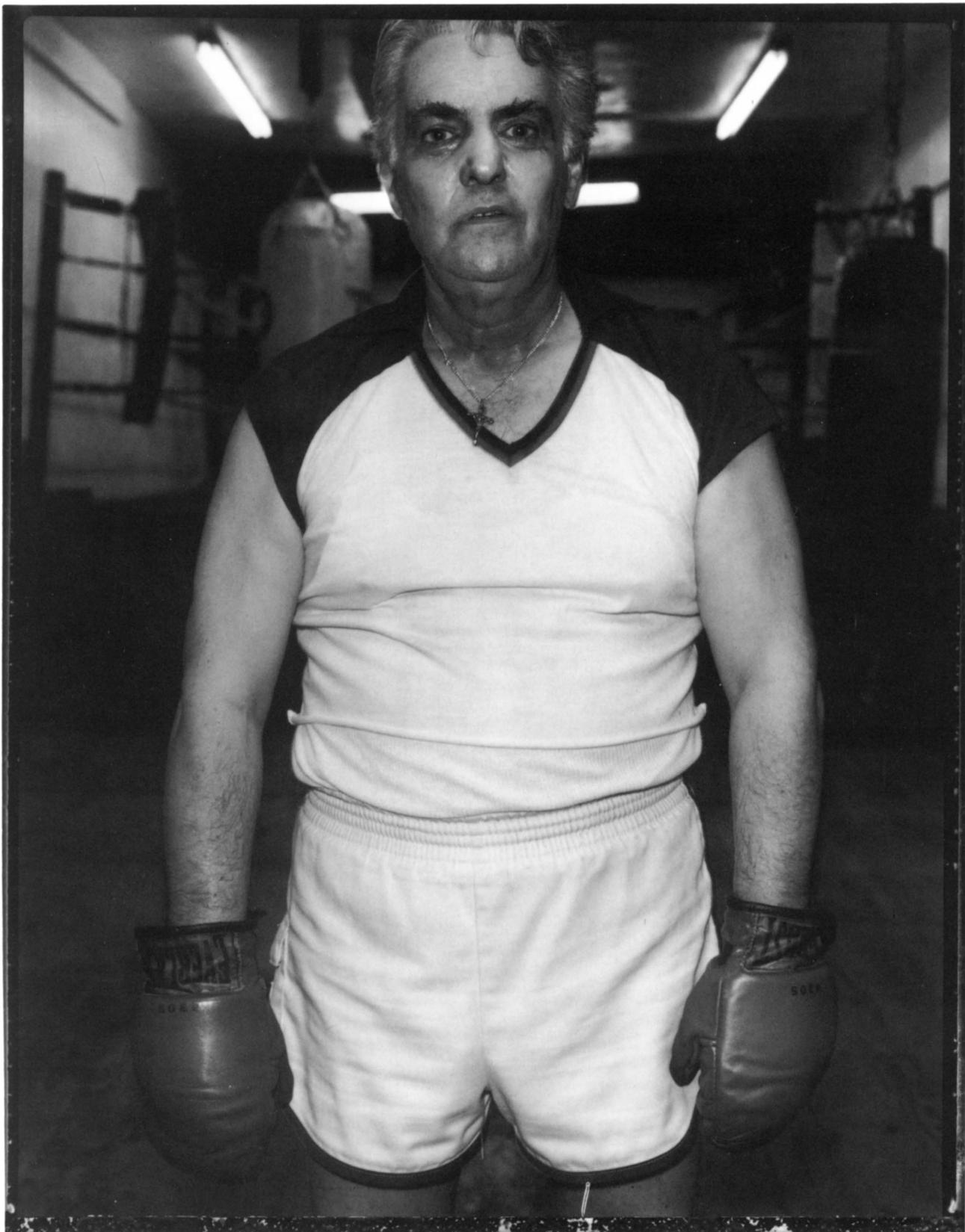
Polly Brown Roxbury Mount Pleasant Avenue



Polly Brown Roxbury Carolers, Christmas Eve, Dudley Square



Roswell Angier North End *Dedication of Rose Kennedy Garden*



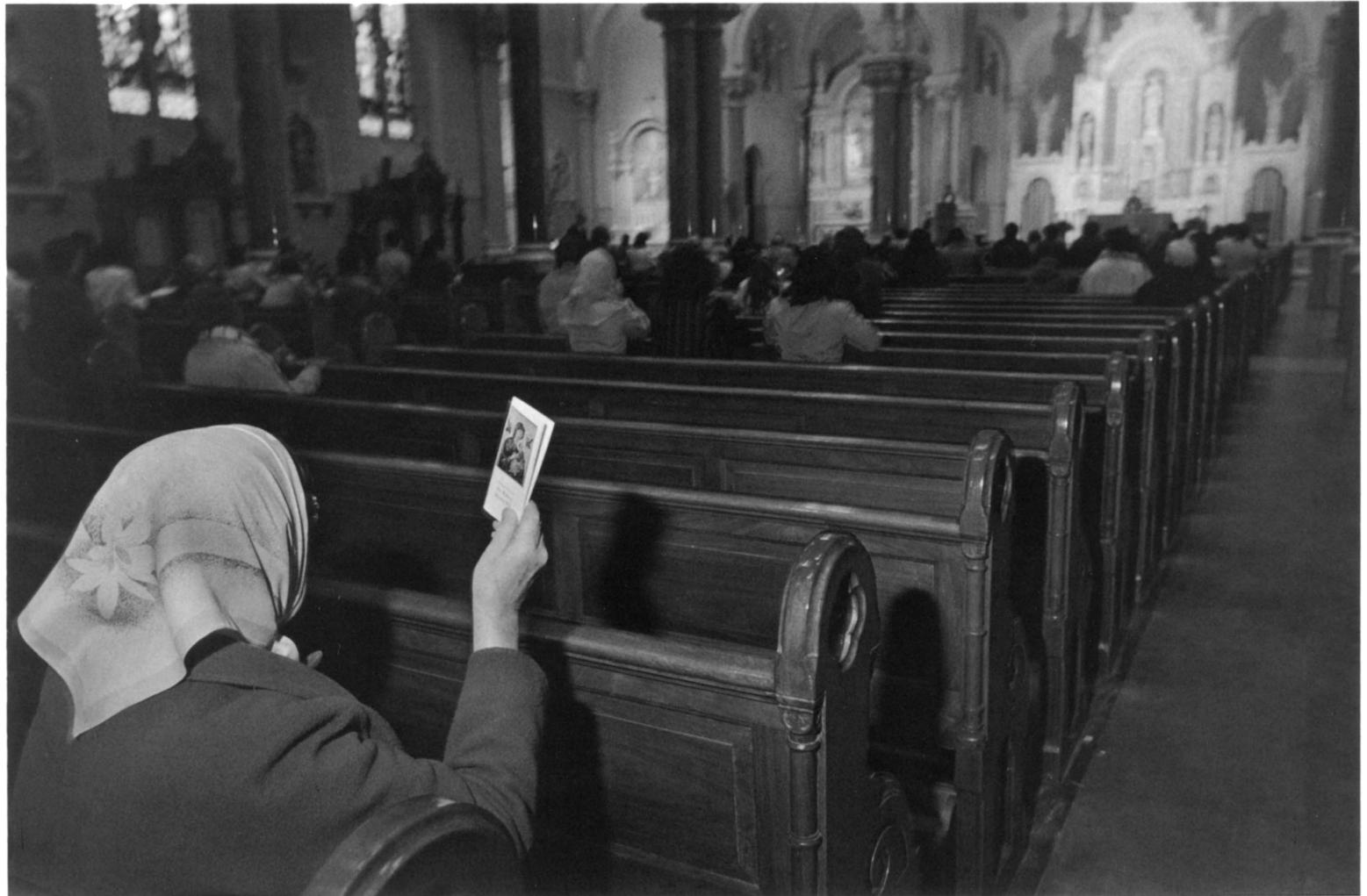
Bill Burke Roslindale *Dom Uva, West End Gym*



Kelly Wise Charlestown Main Street



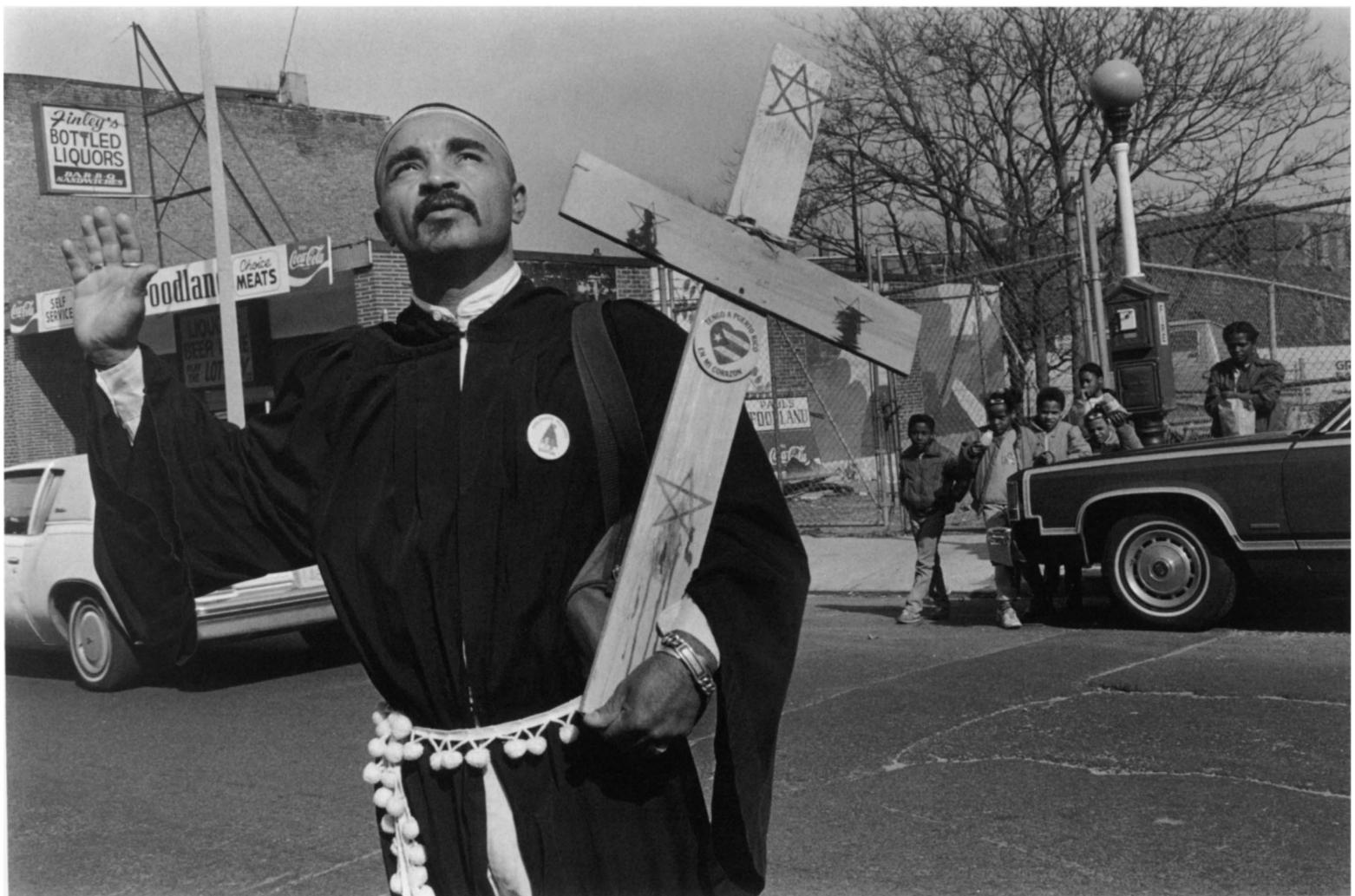
Polly Brown Roxbury *Opening day of Little League season*



Polly Brown Roxbury Mission Church, Mission Hill



Roswell Angier North End *Caffè Vittoria, Hanover Street*

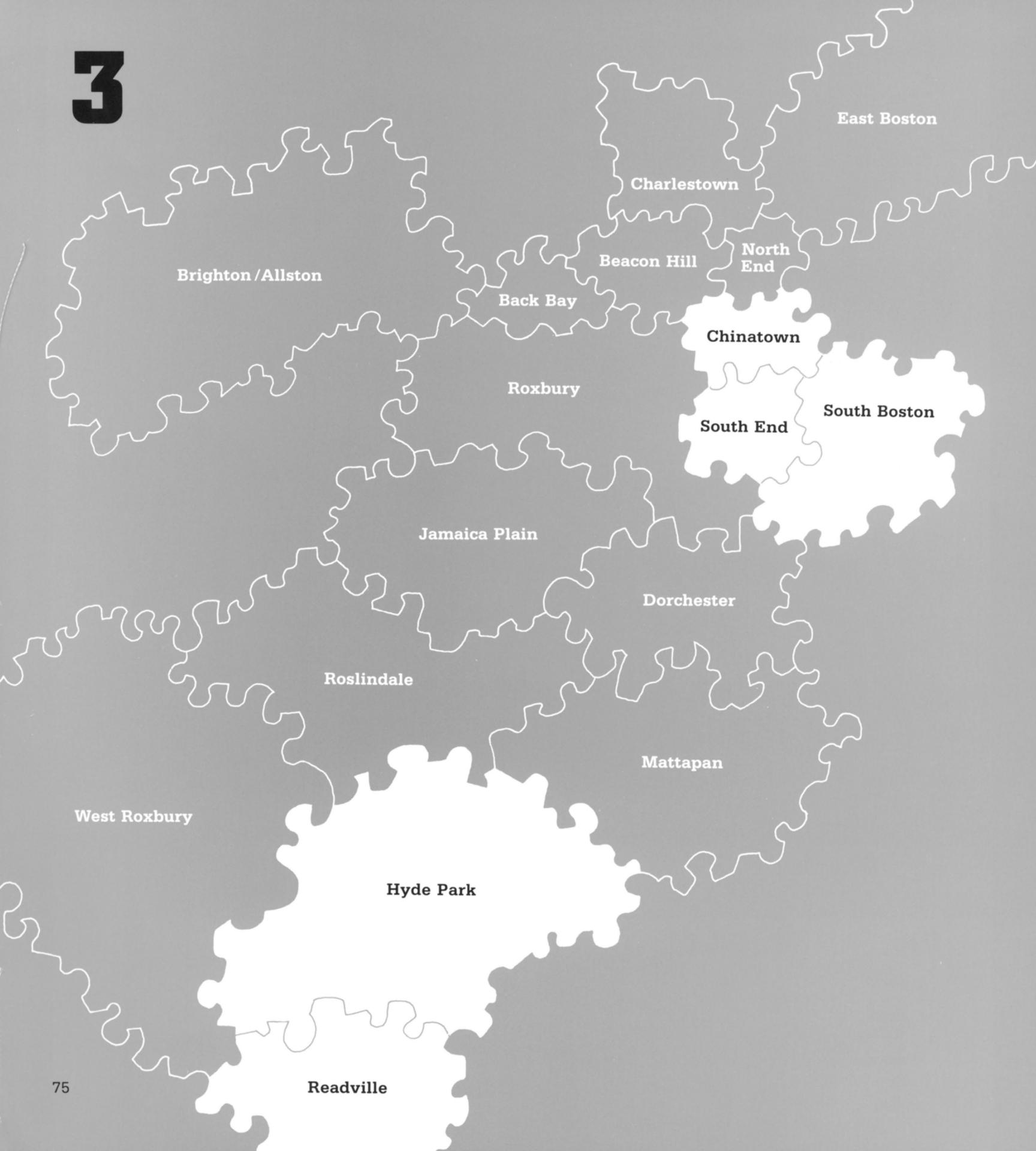


Polly Brown Roxbury Good Friday, Spanish service, Mission Church



Kelly Wise Roslindale James Healy Park

3





Polly Brown South End Washington Street



Roswell Angier South Boston *A Street Lunch*



Roswell Angier South Boston *L Street Brownies*



Kelly Wise Chinatown *Tyler Street*



Bill Burke Hyde Park Accident



Polly Brown Chinatown Demonstration



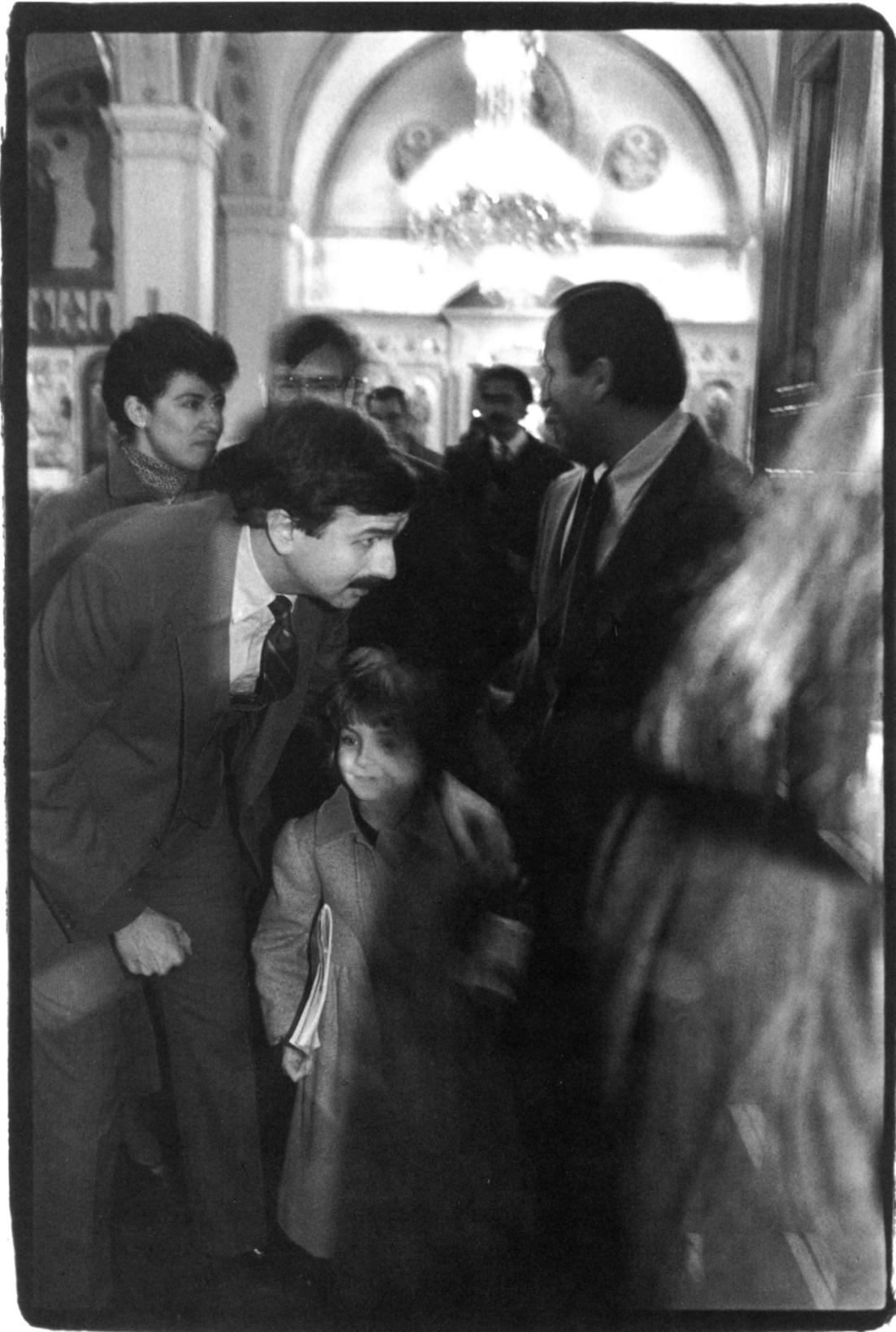
Kelly Wise Chinatown *Chinatown People's Progressive Association* headquarters



Roswell Angier Hyde Park Shoemaker



Kelly Wise Chinatown *Near the Chinatown Gate*



Kelly Wise South End *After Mass, the Cathedral*



Polly Brown South End *Quinceañera*



Polly Brown South End *Doña Candida, Villa Victoria Housing Project*



Roswell Angier Chinatown Mall, Beach Street



Roswell Angier South End *Sunday brunch*



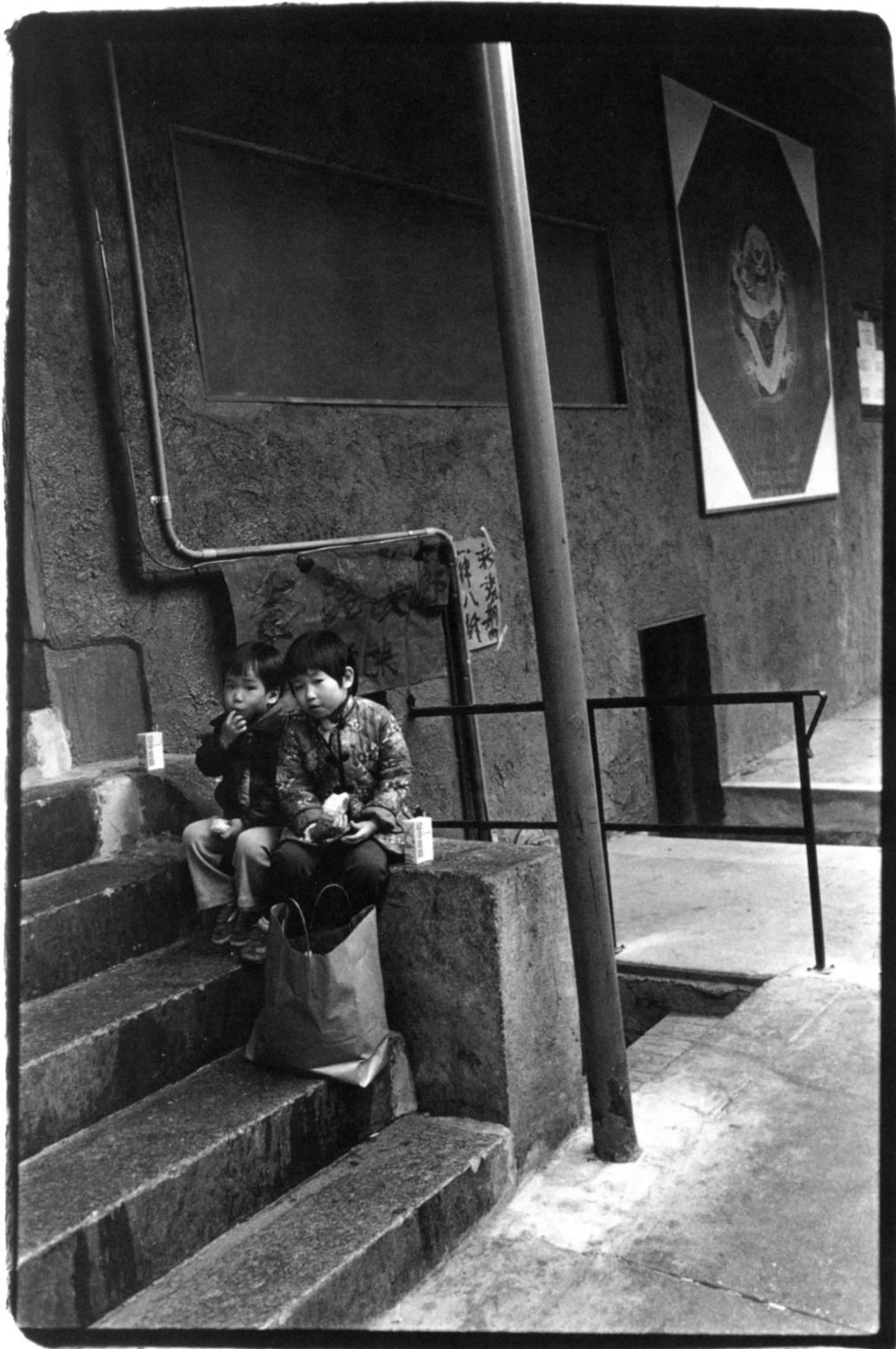
Kelly Wise Chinatown *Eastern Live Poultry Company*



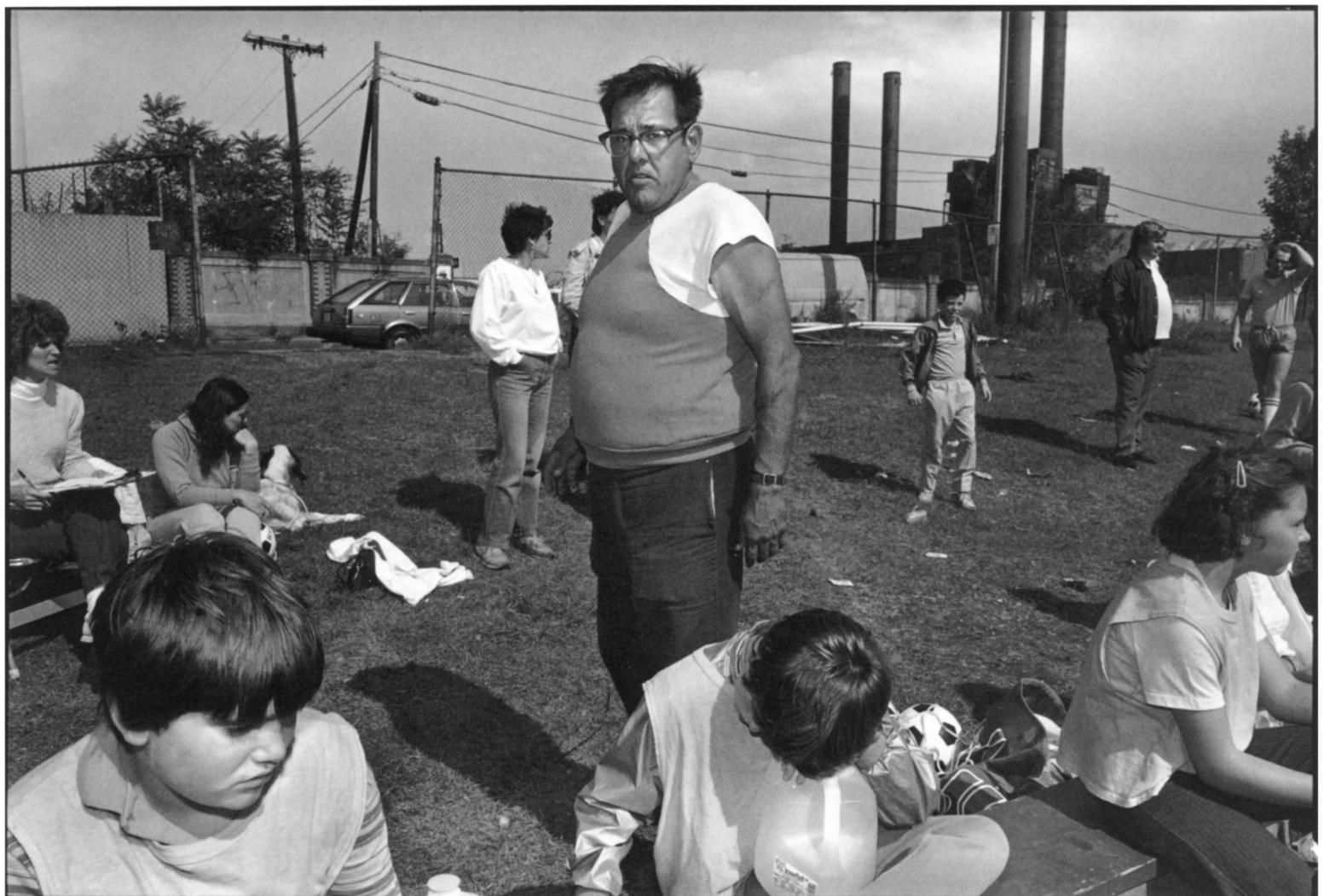
Roswell Angier Readville Hyde Park Avenue



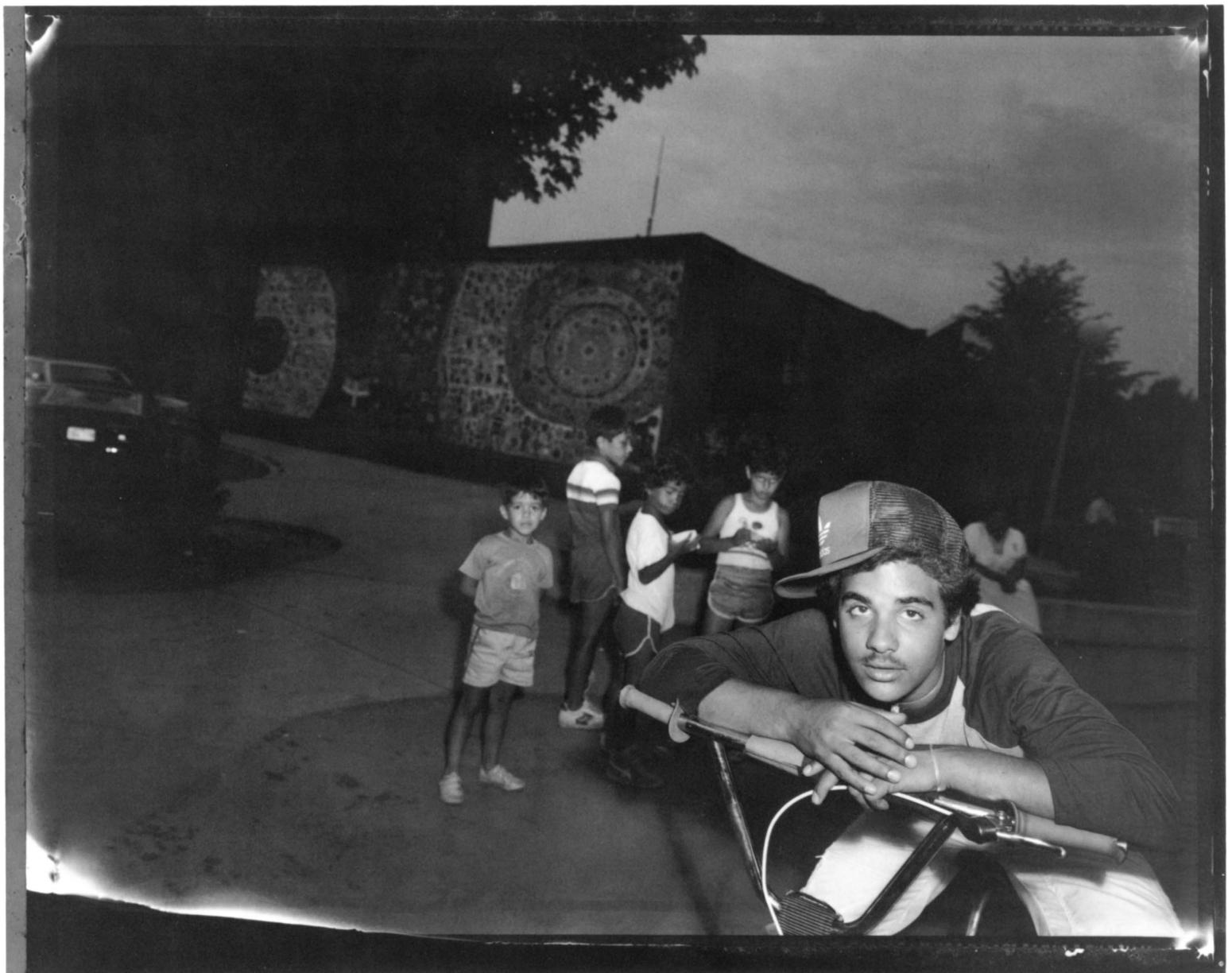
Kelly Wise Chinatown *Hing Shing Pastry Shop*



Kelly Wise Chinatown *In front of Golden Palace Restaurant*



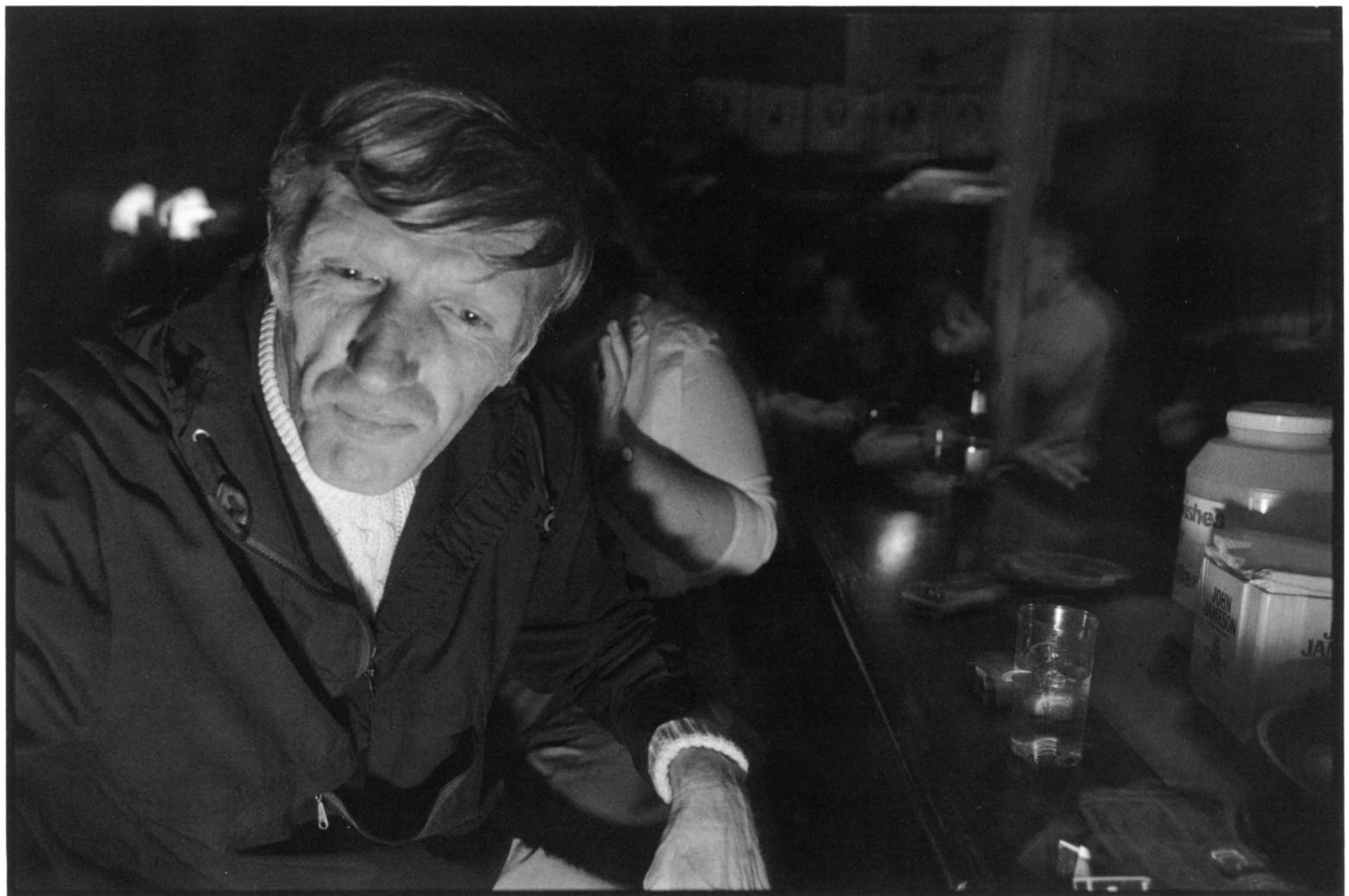
Roswell Angier South Boston Soccer game



Polly Brown South End *Villa Victoria Plaza*



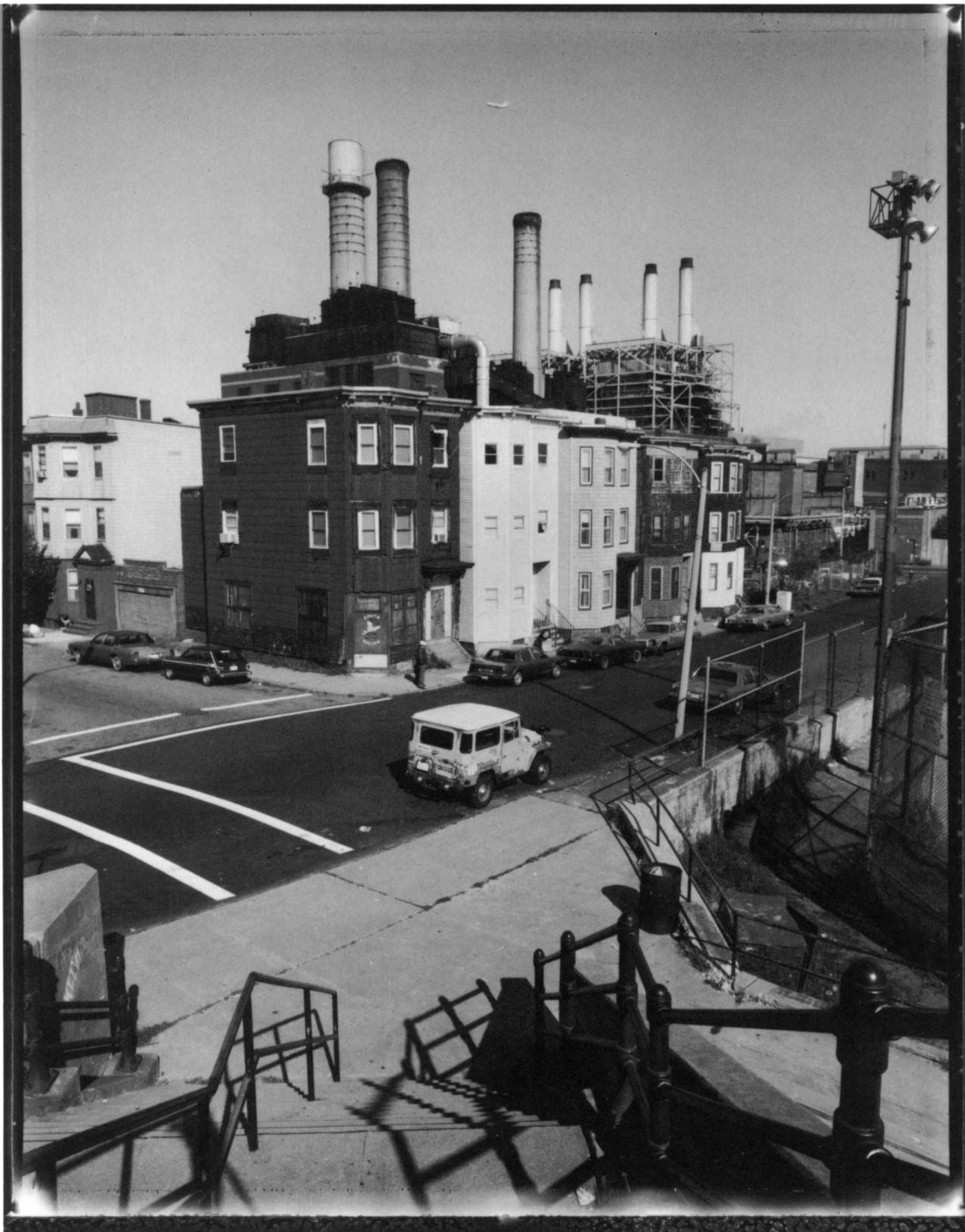
Kelly Wise Chinatown *Chinese New Year*



Roswell Angier South Boston *Lower End Saloon*



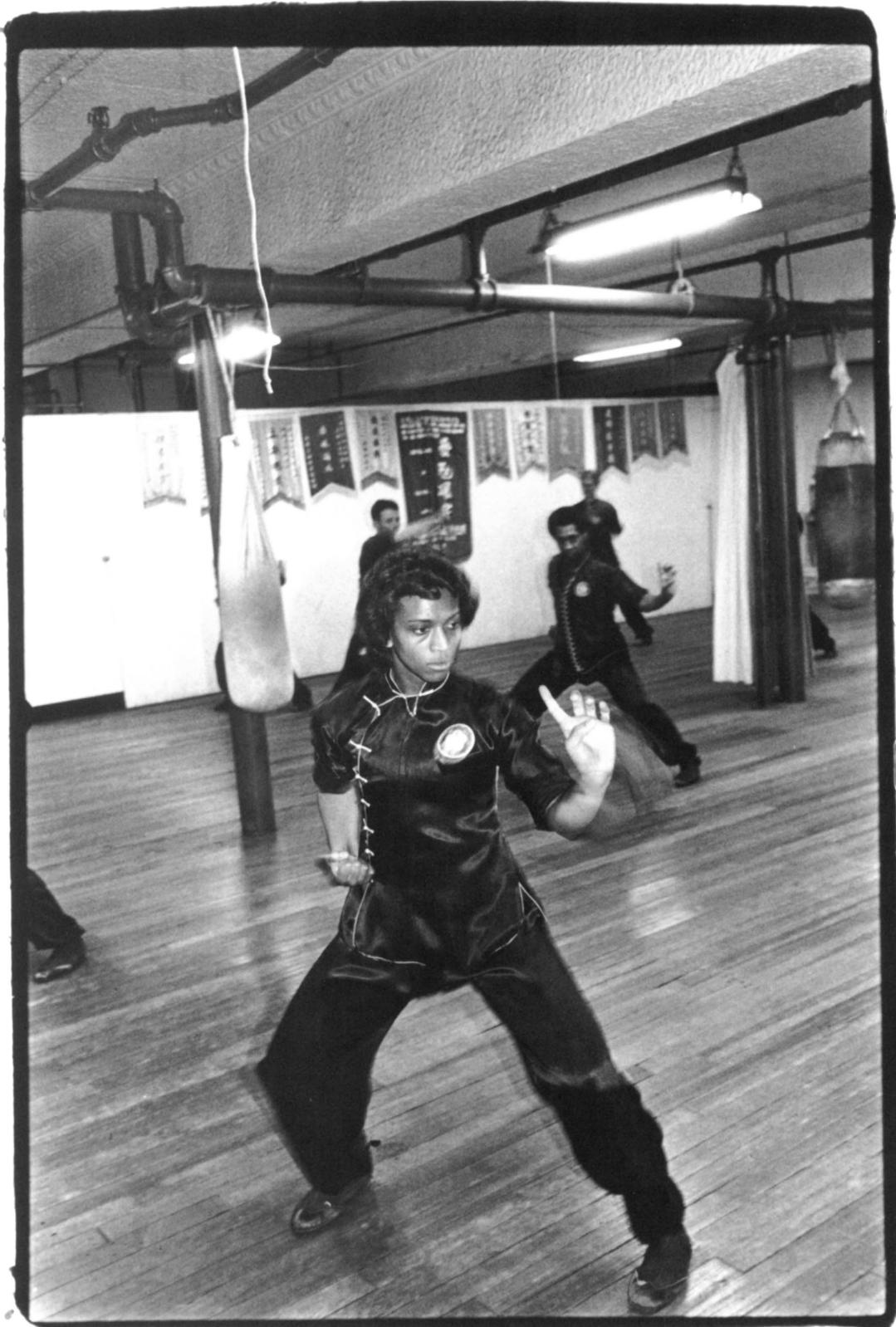
Polly Brown South Boston Rainbow Coalition Benefit at the Channel



Bill Burke South Boston *Intersection of M and Second Streets*



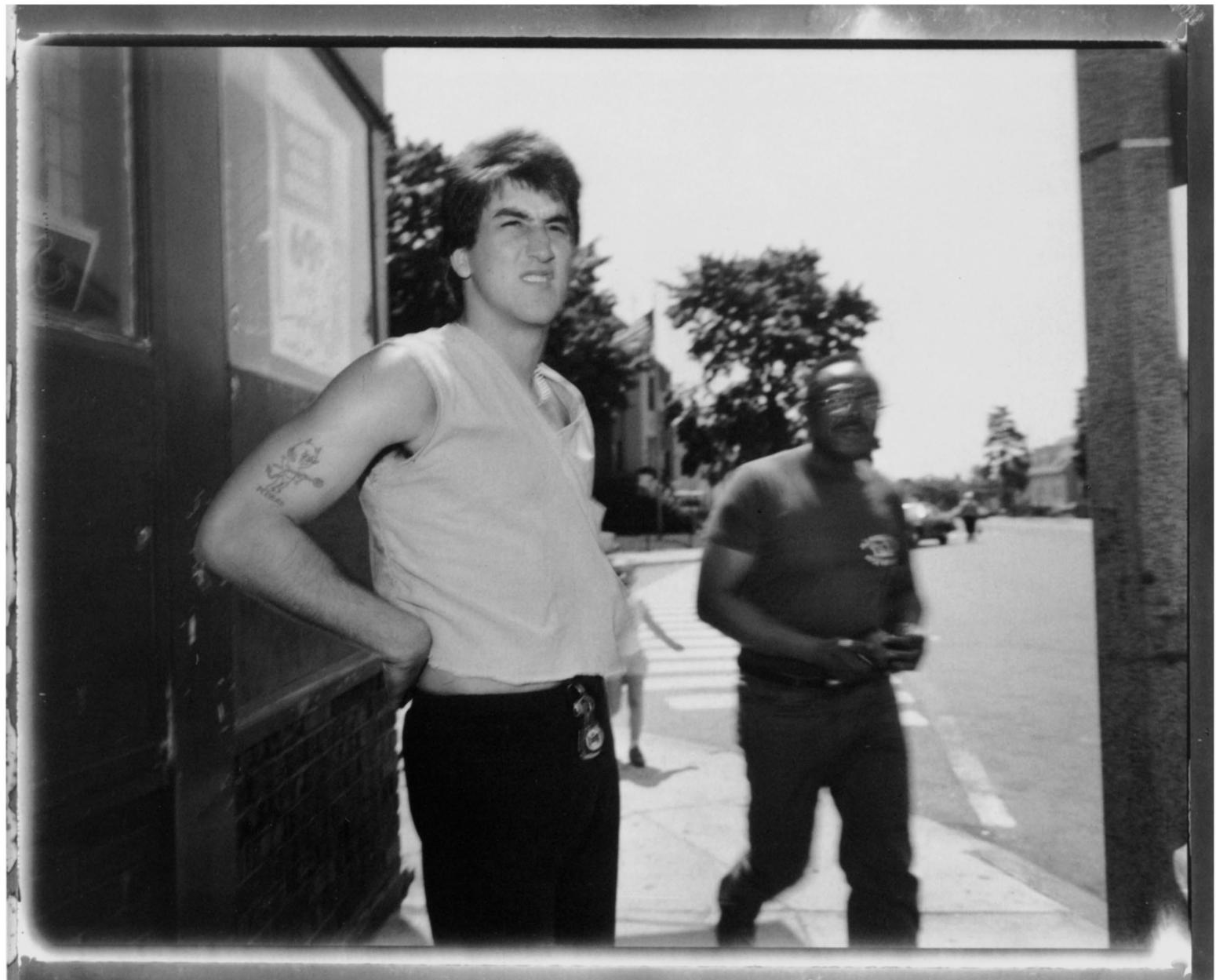
Bill Burke South Boston *Mary Madden School of Irish Step Dancing*



Kelly Wise Chinatown Academy of Chinese Martial Arts



Bill Burke Readville *First Communion gift*



Roswell Angier Hyde Park *Cleary Square*



Polly Brown South End *Altercation*



Kelly Wise Chinatown Dinner party



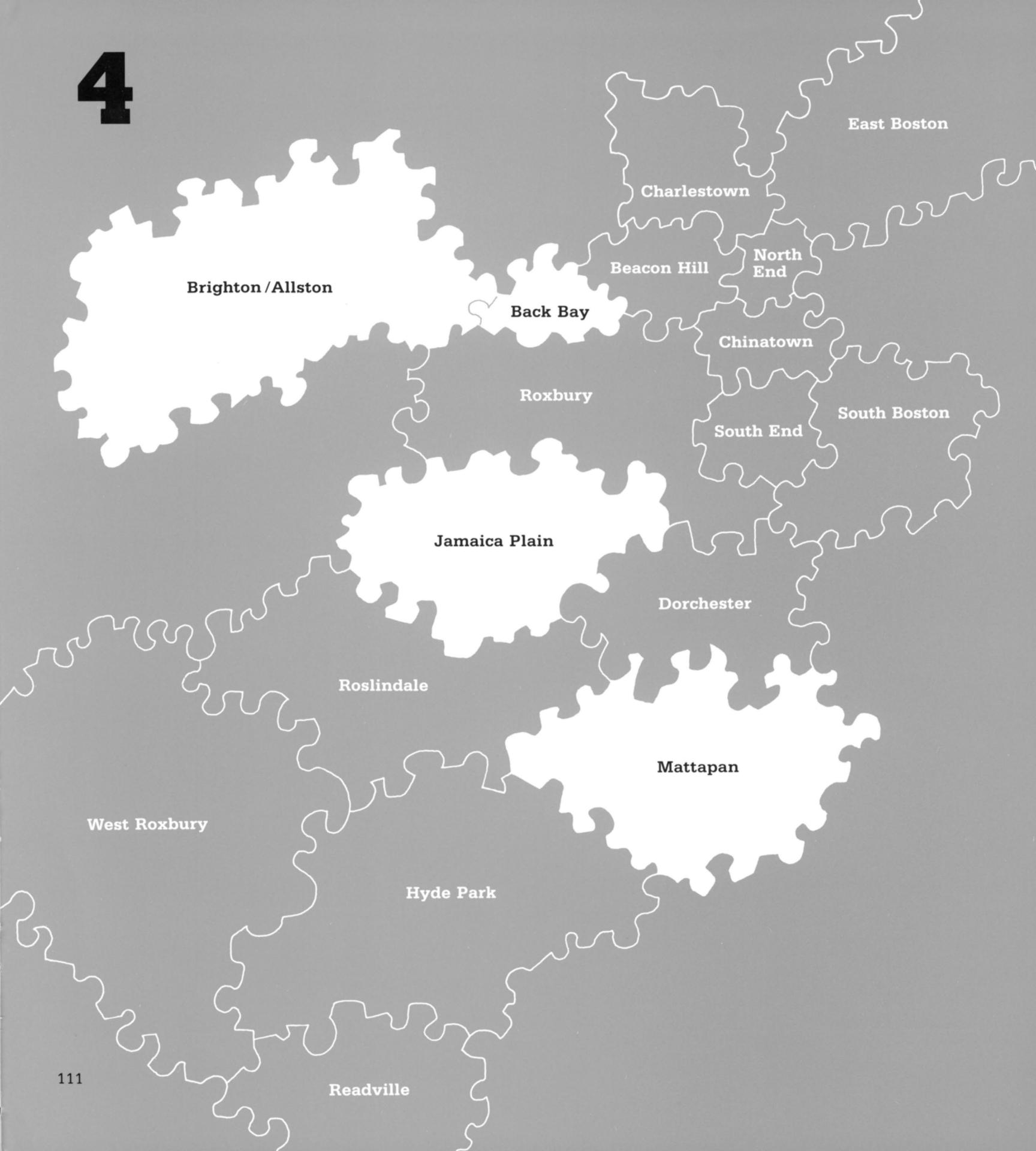
Polly Brown South End *Bob the Chef Restaurant*

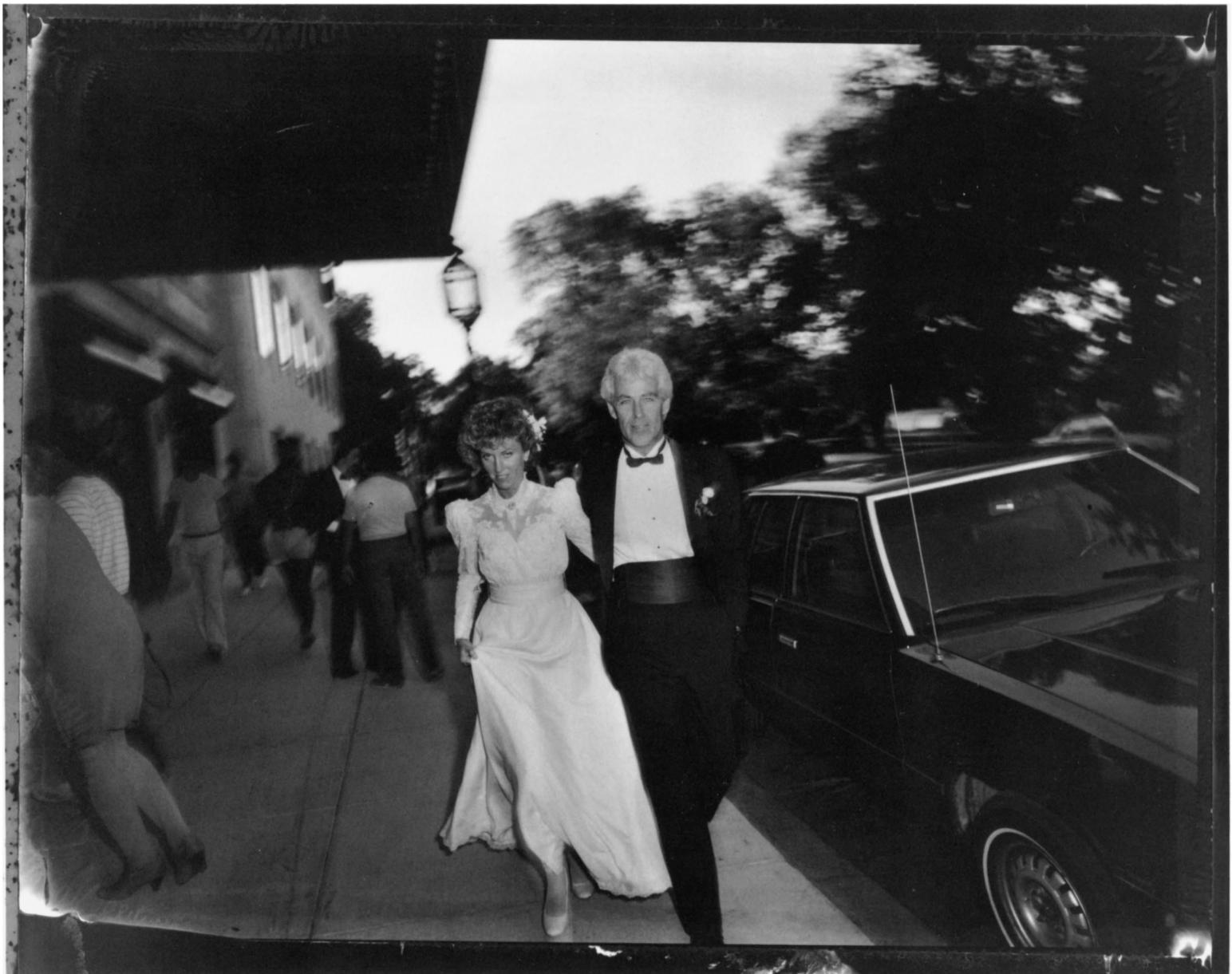


Polly Brown South End *E. Alice Taylor, at 95 the oldest living member of the NAACP, now deceased*



Roswell Angier South Boston *Lentini-Gibbons Memorial Field*





Polly Brown Back Bay *Outside the Ritz Carlton Hotel*



Roswell Angier Brighton Western Avenue



Bill Burke Jamaica Plain *Orange Line from Forest Hills*



Roswell Angier Brighton Market Street



Roswell Angier Allston *Cambodian household*



Polly Brown Mattapan *Fourth of July*



Polly Brown Back Bay *Bastille Day celebration, the French Library*



Polly Brown Back Bay *Gay Pride Day, Dartmouth Street*



Bill Burke Back Bay Kenmore Square



Kelly Wise Jamaica Plain *Centre Street, Hyde Square*



Bill Burke Jamaica Plain *Temple of Santa Barbara*



Kelly Wise Jamaica Plain Kazoo band



Polly Brown Jamaica Plain *Vietnam Veterans Day parade*



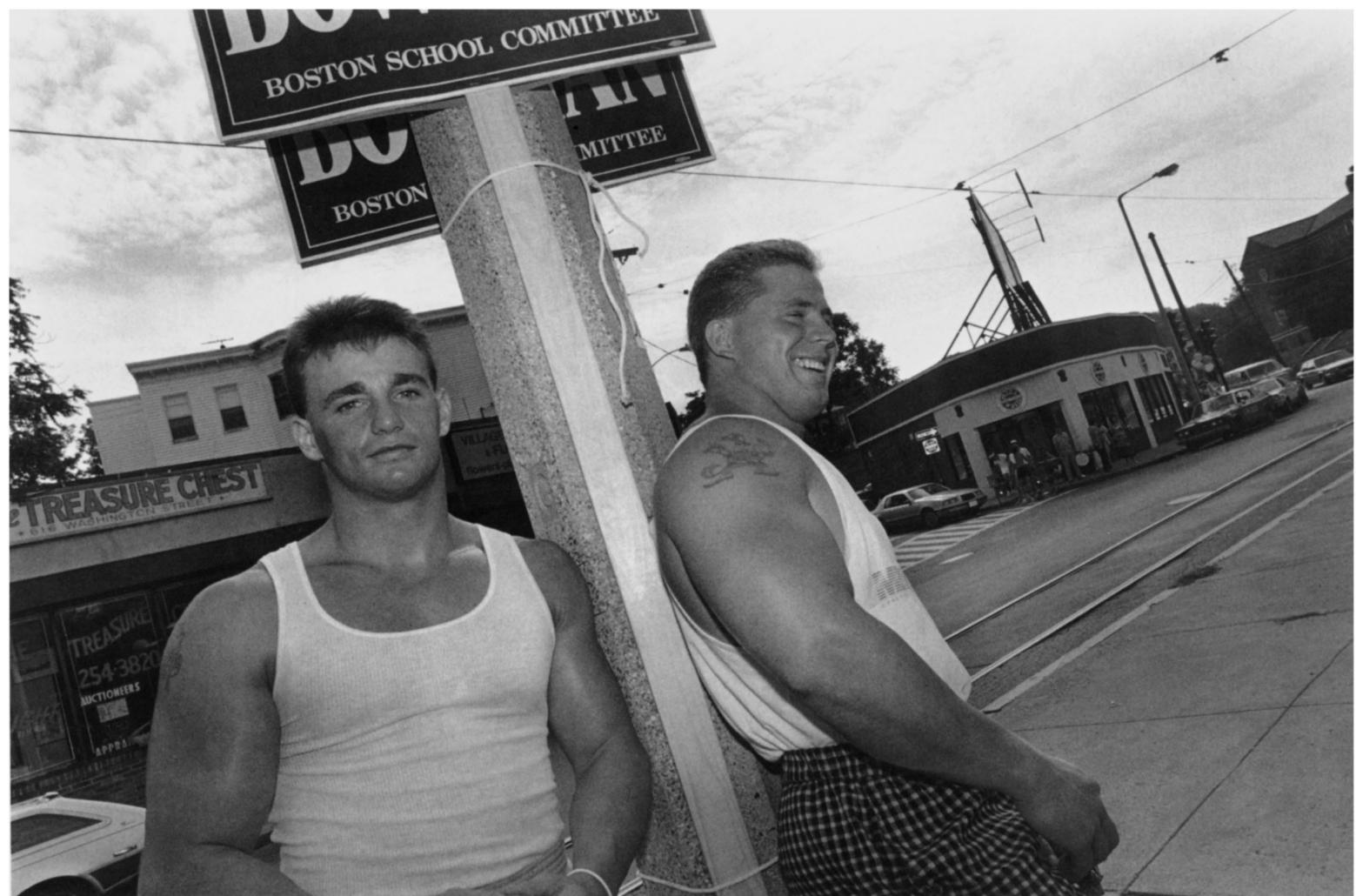
Bill Burke Back Bay Ann's Restaurant



Roswell Angier Jamaica Plain Forest Hills Station



Kelly Wise Jamaica Plain *Sunbather, Jamaica Pond*



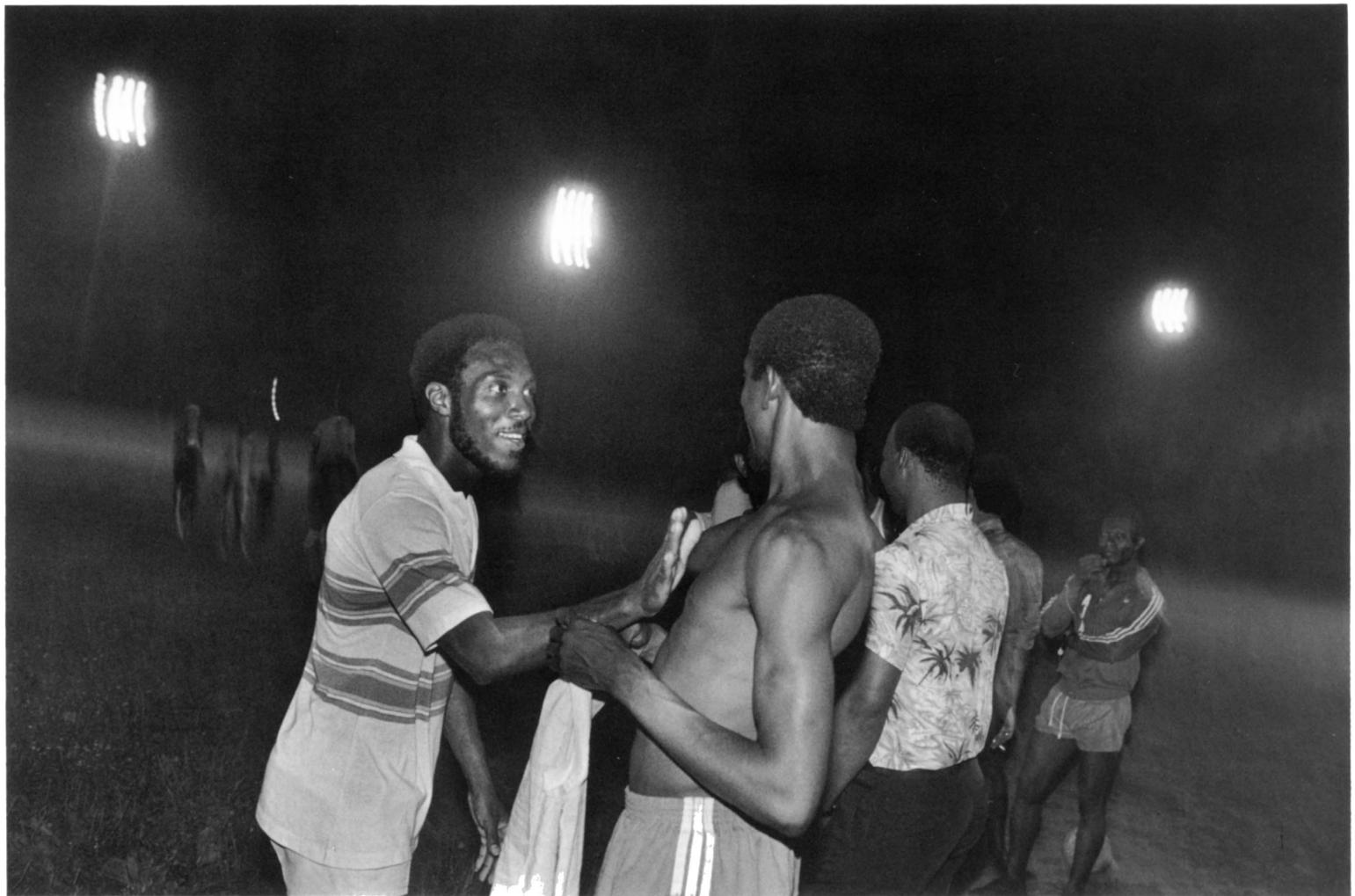
Polly Brown Brighton *Bodybuilders, Oak Square*



Roswell Angier Brighton *Dedication of Veronica B. Smith Senior Center*



Kelly Wise Back Bay *Hemenway Street*



Polly Brown Mattapan *Haitian soccer players, Almont Park*



Kelly Wise Jamaica Plain *Playground*



Kelly Wise Back Bay *Emerson College pier, Charles River*



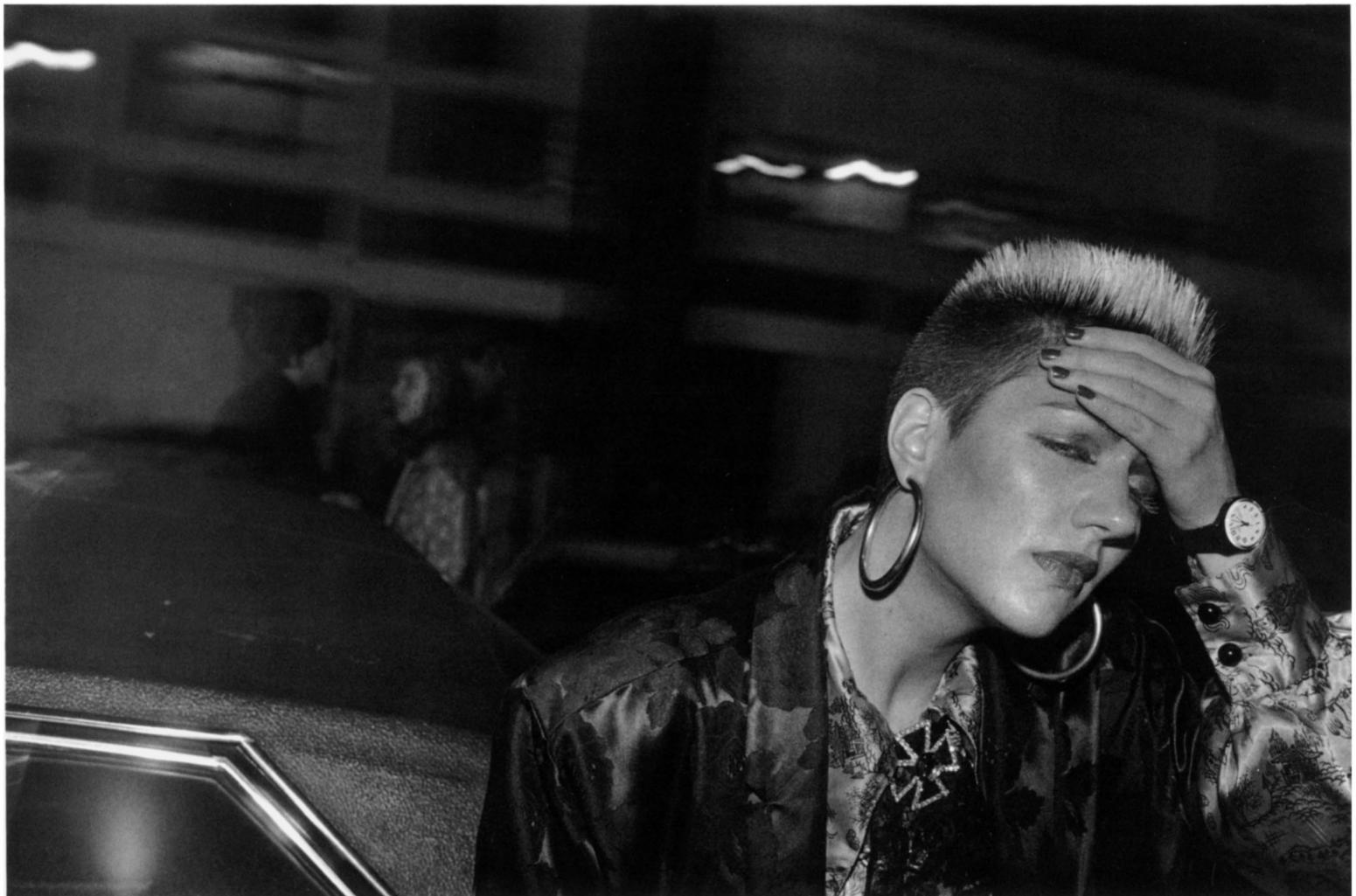
Polly Brown Mattapan Mattapan Square



Bill Burke Jamaica Plain *Daughters of St. Paul*



Kelly Wise Back Bay *Homeless man, Exeter Street*



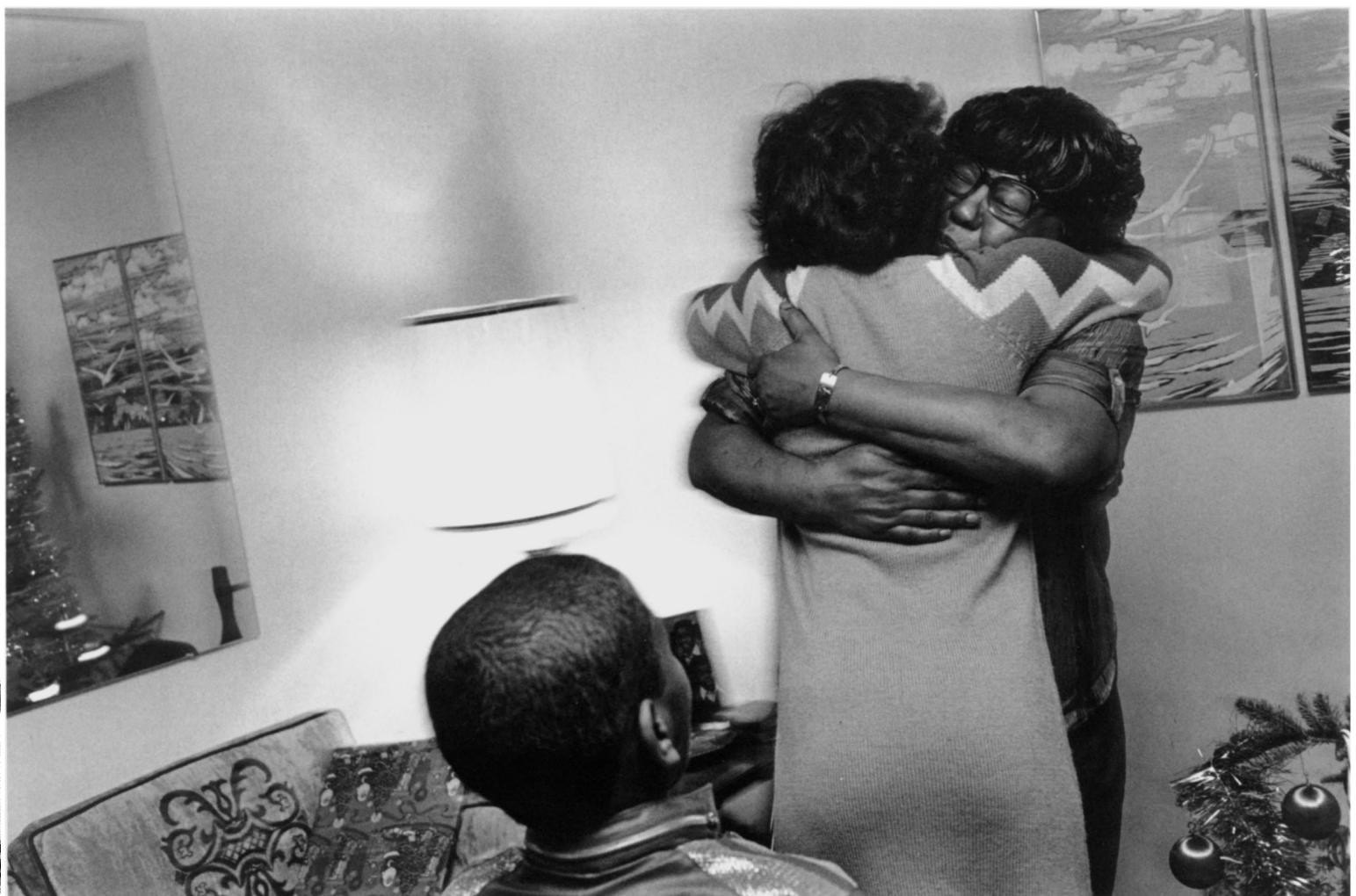
Polly Brown Back Bay Spit, Lansdowne Street



Roswell Angier Back Bay Purim celebration, Chabad House



Roswell Angier Allston Cambodian Buddhist ceremony



Polly Brown Mattapan Williams family, Christmas Eve

FROM THE 1987 PUBLICATION:

Photographs show family celebrations, religious rituals, the homeless, couples, children, bodybuilders, parades, street scenes, and shops in each section of Boston.

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